

ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

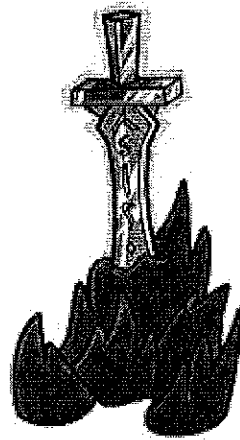


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ARTHUR



When Constantine the High King of Britain was slain by Vortigern, his sons Ambrose and Uther made war on their father's slayer. The usurper was killed and Ambrosius became king but when he died Uther ascended the throne.

Uther's chief counsellor was the wizard Merlin, a man possessed of great magical powers; he could read men's destiny in the formation of the clouds; he could see into the future and cast powerful spells. Uther trusted Merlin in all things; and when one

day Uther saw the shape of a winged dragon marked out in the sky Merlin told him this meant that one day Uther would have a son who would achieve greatness far surpassing that of his father. From that time Uther called himself 'Pendragon', meaning 'dragon's head'.

To encourage peace among his nobles, who had until recently been at war, Uther summoned everyone to a great feast at his court. Among those gathered was Gorloise, the Duke of Cornwall, and his beautiful wife Igraine. Uther immediately fell in love with this woman, and began sending her gifts daily. Soon she grew troubled at the attention the king was paying her. Igraine begged her husband: 'Let us leave the court, husband, for I fear the king's favour can bring us no good.'

By the next day the Duke of Cornwall, his wife and retinue had departed. When Uther discovered their flight his rage knew no bounds. Blind to his all-consuming desire for Igraine, he interpreted the Duke's departure as treason. He gathered an army and besieged the Duke of Cornwall in the well-fortified castle of Tintagel, where Gorloise had sent his wife for safe keeping.

The days went by and Uther's infatuation for Igraine grew stronger.

'I can think of no one but Igraine. How can I ease this torment?' Uther asked Merlin. 'You are a magician. Tell me how I can win her.'

'I have the power to bring this about,' said Merlin, 'but there is a price to pay.'

'I don't care what it is,' said Uther. 'I must have her.'

Merlin explained how he could cast a spell whereby Uther would take on the appearance of the Duke, in which guise he might lie with Igraine.

'It is destined that I do this for you. But by doing so I must claim the child that is to be born of this union. Within an hour of his birth you must give him to me, and I will rear him in readiness for his great destiny.'

This Uther promised to do, and when evening fell Uther, in the shape of Gorloise, was admitted to Igraine's chamber. The child was conceived that night.

But at the very time that Uther was with Igraine, the Duke of Cornwall was making a surprise attack on the High King's forces, during which he was slain. When news of Gorloise's death was brought to Igraine she was deeply troubled. How could her husband have been with her when all reports said he was at that time dead? She kept these thoughts to herself.

Uther, now victorious, came to woo Igraine, and when the time of mourning had passed he asked Igraine to be his wife. But Igraine was an honest woman and when she found she was carrying a child which could not be her husband's she bravely told Uther what had happened on the night of her husband's death. Uther then told her of Merlin's magic, and she agreed to become his wife.

They were soon married and when the child, a boy, was born Uther took him from his mother. In secret he went to a castle gate and handed the child to the waiting Merlin. Merlin carried the baby down the steep cliff from Tintagel and took him to a distant castle. There he entrusted the child, now named Arthur, to the care of the good knight Sir Ector. Asking no questions as to whom this child was, he promised to bring him up with his own son Kay.

Uther and Igraine had no more children and when Uther died dark days fell upon the land, for there was no heir to succeed him. Everyone believed that Uther's child had died at birth, and now the nobles competed to become king.

During this time Arthur grew to young manhood in the safety of Sir Ector's castle. Merlin watched over him carefully, waiting for the moment when the rightful High King should claim his crown.

When Kay was dubbed a knight, Arthur became his squire and went with Kay to his first tournament. However, in all the excitement Arthur forgot to bring Kay's sword to the tournament ground. Arthur then remembered seeing a sword which was strangely embedded in a large stone in a churchyard. Rather than return all the way to their lodgings he went to this place and effortlessly drew the sword from the stone. What he did not know was that this sword had been placed there many years before by a wise man who had foretold that it would remain embedded there until it was claimed by the true king.

A crowd of astonished knights quickly gathered to see who this boy was who had freed the sword, for in the past many of them had tried unsuccessfully to claim it. Now it was the time for Merlin to reveal who the youth was. He drew back Arthur's sleeve and there, plain for all to see, was the mark of a dragon on Arthur's arm. This mark proved Arthur was indeed the son of the last king, Uther Pendragon, the son thought by most people to have died in infancy.

Many proud kings and knights, not surprisingly, scorned the right of this apparently low-born youth to be king. Instead they declared war against him.

Arthur's foremost adversary was the great warrior King Pellinore. When this king brutally killed one of his loyal knights Arthur determined to avenge the death. The impetuous young king rode out to meet and challenge King Pellinore. But Arthur was an inexperienced fighter and soon fell, badly wounded, beneath King Pellinore's mighty sword strokes. As Arthur lay stricken, his sword broken, King Pellinore moved in to kill the upstart king.

Meanwhile, however, Merlin had been watching the combat from a hiding-place, and seeing that Arthur was about to be killed he cast King Pellinore into a deep sleep. As Pellinore's great bulk sank heavily to the ground in charmed sleep, Merlin came forward to comfort Arthur.

The magician's glittering grey eyes were, for once, dimmed with sorrow, and with concern for the welfare of the young king. But he knew he had not the power to heal him. And so, helping the wounded youth to his horse, he mounted his own and the two men rode slowly away into an enormous forest to seek a hermit who, Merlin hoped, would heal Arthur's wounds.

They found the hermit in his small stone house, bent over a fire and watching a boiling pot. Great bubbles broke slowly on the surface of the liquid inside, and the air was filled with the aroma of herbs. As the hermit added more berries and twigs and leaves, the steam would rise and change colour. He turned to see who entered his dwelling and did not seem surprised to see Merlin.

'The birds told me that an old enchanter and a wounded knight were coming towards me, and I thought it must be you, Merlin. Who is the youth? Put him down

to rest, for I see he is gravely wounded.' Arthur was laid down on a pallet of straw, where he closed his eyes and looked for all the world like a dead man.

Merlin crossed the floor to the hermit. They looked at each other, both knowing that Merlin had a favour to ask.

'This is Arthur, the noble son of Uther Pendragon. It is not time that he should die. His life has long to run, but unless you give him aid all the glories which his life holds will be lost. Even though I am a powerful magician, it is not in my power to heal him. That is why I am asking you. In three days we must continue our journey, for we must reach the lands of Avalon. There we will meet the Lady of the Lake, who has a special gift for Arthur.'

'I see you love this young king,' said the hermit, 'and it is my fortune to possess the skill to heal him.' The hermit immediately set to work administering healing balms to Arthur's wounds.

For two days and nights Arthur lay delirious in the cave, tossing and turning feverishly. Then as the medicines worked their way through his body, a change came over him. On the third morning he awoke refreshed, his wounds all but healed.

'Arthur, you must get up,' said Merlin, seeing him awake. 'Today we have a long way to travel.'

From the insistence in his voice Arthur knew it was no time to argue. Gingerly rising to his feet, he stumbled towards the door. He looked round to thank the hermit but his benefactor was nowhere to be seen.

Outside the hermitage the air was chill. Shivering, Arthur wrapped his cloak closer around him. Merlin gave a low whistle, at which their horses came forward from among the trees. The two men mounted, Merlin whispered in the ears of the horses, and with an answering whinny they cantered forward.

The horses seemed to know exactly where they were going. As they made their way through the tall trees, through thick undergrowth, across narrow streams and up mossy banks, they never faltered. Their speed caused a considerable breeze, and as they galloped Arthur seemed to hear the words 'Arthur is coming. Arthur is coming.' He felt he was being watched, and at times he could see the glitter of many pairs of eyes through the trees. Sometimes the branches of the trees looked like waving arms pointing the way forward. He rode in a state of wonder without asking what it all meant, or where this journey was leading them. But Merlin was silent.

At length they emerged from the forest and Arthur saw nestled beneath him between soft green hills a calm and very blue lake. At the far end of the lake he could make out the misty shapes of a chain of islands rising out of the water. Through a break in the distant hills he could see a massive plain reaching far out to the horizon.

'Oh, Merlin, where are we?' asked Arthur. 'If I had died I would have thought this were paradise, for this place makes me feel so at peace.' He sat up in his saddle and drank in the sweet air of the land.

'This is Avalon,' said Merlin. 'Note it well, Arthur, for you will never see it in such a light again. Beneath this lake and on those distant islands is the great kingdom of the Lady of the Lake.'

Their journey was now nearing its end and as they rode down towards the water Arthur felt that the moment of some great revelation was at hand. He reached the lake, dismounted from his horse and quickly made his way to the water's edge.

'I must drink,' he thought. Stooping down, he cupped his hands and dipped them into the lake. His fingers tingled as he raised the cold water in his cupped hands to his mouth. It was the purest, freshest water he had ever tasted.

Suddenly, he felt as if the sun was blazing straight on to his head and, as he looked up, he saw rising out of the centre of the lake a pale arm swathed in glistening white

samite. In its hand, held aloft and dazzlingly bright, was a mighty sword. The blade shone like the sun and from the jewels on the hilt blazed all the colours of the rainbow. It was so bright that Arthur had to turn his eyes away. Arthur knew that he must have this sword.

Merlin touched his arm and, reading his thoughts, said, 'It is your sword, Arthur. When you were born the swordsmiths in Avalon began forging this sword for the time when you should come to claim it. Through all the world they sought the finest jewels for the hilt and mined deep in the earth to find the purest gold in which to engrave its name: Excalibur. It is held in trust for you by the Lady of the Lake and you must ask her for it.'

As Merlin spoke the figure of a beautiful woman rose from the water, dressed in robes as blue as the lake itself. As she made her way across the water, gliding as smoothly as a swan, Arthur stood spellbound.

'Welcome, noble Arthur,' said the Lady. 'You have finally come for your sword. It is yours, but in return for it you must swear to grant me a gift whenever I ask for it.'

Anxious only to possess the sword Arthur took this oath without thinking. Then the Lady led him to a part of the shore where a small boat was concealed among the reeds.

'Go and claim your sword,' she said, and with these words she vanished.

Arthur stepped into the boat. It moved off from the shore as if rowed by invisible oarsmen, yet there was no sight nor sound of oars breaking water. The boat found its own course towards the centre of the lake, and soon the sword was within Arthur's reach. Leaning out of the boat Arthur took hold of the sword, at which the pale arm disappeared beneath the water. He gripped the sword. Its hilt fitted his hand perfectly. The handle seemed to be fashioned of gold leaves which furled round the handle like a vine round an olive tree. Armed with such a sword, Arthur felt he was a true king.

As he gazed on the sword, the boat returned him to the shore where Merlin was waiting for him. Arthur leapt ashore but would not let go of Excalibur. He held it aloft marvelling at the pure bright steel of the blade, which was tapered to a perfect point.

'Merlin, tell me, why does it bear the words "*Take me*" on one side and "*Cast me aside*" on the other?' the excited Arthur asked.

'Don't concern yourself,' replied Merlin, gently smiling at Arthur's delighted expression, 'but remember that plain beyond this lake and those hills, for that is where you shall fight your final battle. When that time comes you will have to return Excalibur to this lake.'

Although Arthur heard these words, he gave them hardly a moment's thought. His only concern was for his sword – the glorious Excalibur. At that moment the Lady of the Lake appeared again. In her arms she carried a gold scabbard studded with jewels. It was attached to a belt made of the purest silk, into which dragons, the device of Arthur's father Uther Pendragon, had been woven with fine gold thread.

'Arthur,' said the Lady of the Lake, smiling, 'you like your sword well. But take this scabbard, too, for it is worth ten such swords. As long as you wear it you shall never lose blood through wounds in battle.' And so saying the Lady tenderly fastened the belt round Arthur's waist so that the scabbard hung on his left side. Then she disappeared.

It was now time for Arthur and Merlin to leave the land of Avalon. Arthur sheathed his precious sword and, mounting their horses, the two men set off for the kingdom of Logres. Arthur was now ready to fulfil his great destiny to found the noblest order of chivalry – the Knights of the Round Table.

Like Coleridge's story about the Ancient Mariner, this ballad attempts to recreate the air of mystery and enchantment associated with the medieval ballad. Like many of Wordsworth's ballads, it presents its story with a seemingly direct simplicity. The poem looks back to older literature, but the story told in songlike verse is just as common in today's folk music repertoire.

The figure of the woman as temptress has appeared and reappeared in many stories. In most tellings, the woman is irresistibly beautiful, but emotionally cold. Indifferent to the fate of those

who come under her spell, she vanishes as swiftly and mysteriously as she arrives, leaving her victim spiritless and deprived of his manhood. In this poem, the man is also threatened by a fear of mortality, as suggested by the "death-pale" kings, princes, and warriors in the dream.

The poem's title, translated as "The Beautiful Woman Without Pity," repeats the title of a poem by the French poet Alain Chartier. Keats's poem, written in the spring of 1819, probably was influenced by Keats's own fascination with the "self-destroying" experiences of intense passion.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci

1

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge^o has withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

3. sedge: reedy plants.

2

5 O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woebegone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

3

10 I see a lily on thy brow
With anguish moist and fever dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

4

15 I met a lady in the meads,^o
Full beautiful, a fairy's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

13. meads: meadowlands.

5

20 I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;^o
She looked at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.

18. zone: belt or girdle.



6

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A fairy's song.

7

25 She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew,²⁶
And sure in language strange she said—
I love thee true.

8

30 She took me to her elfin grot,²⁹
And there she wept, and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci by
Walter Crane (19th century).

26. manna dew: probably a sweet syrup
made from tree sap.

29. grot: cave.

- And there she lulled me asleep,
 And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!
 35 The latest° dream I ever dreamed
 On the cold hill's side.

10

- I saw pale kings, and princes too,
 Pale warriors, death pale were they all;
 They cried—"La belle dame sans merci
 40 Hath thee in thrall!"°

11

- I saw their starved lips in the gloam°
 With horrid warning gaped wide,
 And I awoke and found me here
 On the cold hill's side.

12

- 45 And this is why I sojourn here,
 Alone and palely loitering,
 Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
 And no birds sing.

35. latest: last.

40. in thrall: enslaved.

41. gloam: twilight.

Responding to the Poem

Analyzing the Poem

Identifying Details

1. Who are the two speakers in the poem? Where does the first speaker stop and the other start? What is the first speaker's question?
2. At the opening of the poem, what time of year is it?
3. What **images** help you visualize the knight?
4. According to the knight's story, what happened when he went off with the enchantress? What did he learn from his dream?

Interpreting Meanings

5. What do you infer happened to the pale kings and princes?
6. Where does Keats vary the **meter** of each ballad stanza? What is the effect of this change in rhythm?

Writing About the Poem

A Creative Response

1. **Setting a Ballad to Music.** Try to improvise a musical setting for "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." You do not need to know musical notation: Simply try to imagine what you think would be an effective melody for each stanza.
2. **Writing a Short Story.** Are you satisfied with the knight's explanation of his problem? Write your own version of what "ails" the knight-at-arms.

Sir Gawaine and Lady Ragnell

as told by Peter Amidon

Arthur was lost.

Every winter, at mid-winter, King Arthur and all of his Lords and Ladies and servants and cooks and knights and huntsmen, took a break from the difficult work of defend the borders of Britain from the invading hordes, leaving the Castle Camelot for eating, drinking, singing, dancing and, Arthur's favorite, hunting, at Castle Carlisle.

So Arthur and his men were hunting. Arthur saw what he'd not seen since he was a child; a white hart, and albino deer.

"Take chase," he bellowed, and they took chase. Arthur was the fastest of all the horsemen, and he soon left them all behind. He would get just within bowshot distance of the deer, and draw his bow and arrow, when the deer would bound off down a hill and out of sight, and thus she led him deeper and deeper into the forest.

And then he saw her no more. No deer, no men, strange forest. It was cloudy, and Arthur had no idea of north, south, east, west. He started riding in the direction which he thought would take him back to the Castle Carlisle, but the forest, instead of becoming more familiar, became more strange.

Arthur knew he was lost when he found himself looking over a dark and swampy pond. There were dead trees and tree stumps on the shore and in the shallow water all around the outside of the pond. Some of the stumps were in the strangest shapes; there was one (were his eyes fooling him?) on the far side of the pond that looked just like a knight on a horse. And then it was moving; it was a knight, dressed all in black armor, on a black horse, riding around the outside of the pond towards Arthur. As the dark knight approached Arthur, he raised his sword saying, "Prepare to meet your death Arthur. You've stolen all my lands and property; and now I will get them all back."

"Who are you?" asked Arthur.

"I am Sir Gromer."

"Oh, Sir Gromer," said Arthur, "You, a knight, about to kill an unarmed man." For Arthur had left Excaliber back at the Castle Carlisle.

Sir Gromer lowered his sword. "So, Arthur, you are going to play that game. All right, I am a knight, and I will give you a chance to spare your life. I will put a riddle to you. If you agree, on your word as a knight and a king, to meet me here in a year and a day, and if you can tell me on that day the one true answer to the riddle, then your life will be yours. If you cannot give me the one true answer, your head will be mine."

"Agreed," said Arthur, "What is the riddle?"

"The riddle is this: What is it that woman wants more than anything else?"

"What kind of a riddle is that?" asked Arthur.

"A year and a day!" shouted Sir Gromer, as he rode off around the pond and back into the forest.

Somehow Arthur found his way back to his men. When they returned to the Castle Carlisle, Arthur went up to his wife, Queen Guenevere, and, not wanting to worry her, did not tell her about the threat on his life. He said only, "My wife, I met this fellow, a traveling knight, who put the strangest riddle to me: 'What is it that woman wants more than anything else?'"

"Well, what I want more than anything else," answered Queen Guenevere, "is peace and prosperity for all of Britain."

"That's it then," said Arthur. But he thought he would ask one or two more women in the castle just to make sure. The first woman he met in the castle halls was an unmarried maiden, sister to one of the ladies.

"What is it, my dear, that you want more than anything else?" asked Arthur.

"I really can't tell you, my Lord," she answered.

"Oh yes you can, you will tell your King what you want more than anything else."

"Oh, do I really have to tell?"

"Yes, I am ordering you to tell me," he answered.

"What I have always wanted is . . . is . . . to be your queen," and she ran away down the hall.

"Maybe that wasn't it," mused Arthur.

And so Arthur wandered the halls of Castle Carlisle asking all of the women the question, even the servants and the scullery maids in the kitchen. And each woman he asked gave a different answer.

Queen Guenevere noticed Arthur going around asking all of the women the question, and so she said to him, "Arthur, if you really want to get the one true answer to this riddle, why don't you give great blank books to all of your knights. Then, as they go on their quests, adventures and battles all the next year, they can ask any women they come across the riddle, and write all the answers down in the blank books. You are bound to get the answer that way.

So Arthur gave great blank books to all of his knights, and as they went quests, adventures and battles all the next year, they would ask every woman they saw the riddle, and wrote all of the answers into the books.

One knight was crossing a field when he saw a peasant woman hoeing in a field. The knight dismounted and walked up to her: "Woman, what do you want more than anything else?"

The woman threw down her hoe. "What I want," she started, "is for your King to stop taxing us to death. Just last spring the rain drowned our crops out, and even with a second planting we'll have barely enough to feed my starving family, let alone pay a percentage of our crops and taxes to you."

"Thank you very much," said the knight as he wrote the answer in the book and rode off.

Another knight was riding in another part of the kingdom when he saw three little girls next to a stream. He got off his horse and said, "Little girls, what do you want more than anything in the world?"

"Oh " said one of the girls, "I want to be a beautiful princess with my dress all woven through with threads of silver and gold."

"Not me," said the second, "I want to be a knight with a sword! Whoo! Whoo!" and she swung her imaginary sword about."

"I'm hot! I want to go swimming," whined the third.

And so a year and a day passed as if it was just a moment. Arthur went through all the answers in all of the book; not one of them had the ring of truth, but still, it was time for Arthur to meet Sir Gromer.

Arthur packed all the books onto his horse and rode off. When he got to the strange part of the forest where he had first gotten lost, he heard a sound, a high screeching voice: "Aaarrrrthurrrrr." Arthur could not quite tell from whence came the voice. He tied up his horse and walked about. "Aaaarrrrthurrr." Ah, he could see a shape, something red. As he got closer he could see a figure in red sitting on a rock. "Aaaarthurrrrr."

And then he saw. It was some kind of awful looking creature in a red cloak. It was human, a woman, but so awful and ugly. She had patches of hair here and there on her scabbed head. She had long twisted brown teeth, horse's teeth; her fingers twisted like the roots of a tree.

"Arthur."

"How do you know my name?"

"Never mind. I also know that you are going to meet Sir Gromer with so many answers to the riddle he put to you."

"How do you know that?"

"Never mind. I also know that if you don't give Sir Gromer the one true answer, that he will take your head."

"How do you know that?"

"Never mind. I also know that not one of the answers you have in all of those books is the one true answer."

"How do you know all of this?"

"Never mind. I also know the one true answer."

"Oh my lady, the one true answer, what is it?"

"Oh my lady, oh my lady, and I am going to give you this answer for nothing?"

"Oh no, my lady, I will give you whatever you want."

"Whatever I want?"

"On my word as a knight and a king, whatever you want."

"Well then, approach; I will tell you the answer."

And so King Arthur went up to the loathly lady and she whispered the answer into his ear. Arthur's heart leaped; he knew at once that this was the answer. Arthur ran for his horse, "Oh my lady thank you so much, you have spared my. . ."

"*Oh my Lady thank you,*" she mocked him, "I give you the answer and now there is nothing for me."

Arthur stopped, turned, "Oh my lady forgive me, I forgot my part of the bargain. Of course, you may have whatever you want. I will give you gold, riches. . ."

"I want none of your gold and riches. What I want is to be married to your most brave and handsome knight."

"Oh no, my lady, I could never do that."

"So much for the word of a knight and a king."

"Oh, yes, my word, of course, that is what you want, and that is what you will have...wait. . . an answer other than the one you gave me. . ."

"If you find an answer other than the one I gave you that satisfies Sir Gromer, you owe me nothing. But if my answer is the one, you know what you must do."

So Arthur rode off. When he got to the dark pond, there was Sir Gromer, sitting on his horse, waiting for Arthur.

"So Arthur, do you have an answer?"

"How much time do you have?" asked Arthur.

"Arthur, I have all day."

So Arthur took out the first of his books and read the first answer. Sir Gromer shook his head no. Arthur kept reading through all of the answers, going from book to book; Gromer just kept shaking his head no. Arthur got to the last

book, he turned to the last page, he read the last answer. Gromer shook his head no, and as Arthur closed the last book, Sir Gromer raised his sword, when Arthur said, "Wait, I have one more answer." Gromer lowered his sword. Arthur said:

"What woman wants most, is to make her own choice."

". . . my sister . . . my sister . . . MY SISTER LADY RAGNELL TOLD YOU THAT! BLAST HER, BLAST HER, A THOUSAND TIMES BLAST HER!" and Sir Gromer rode off in a rage.

Arthur sighed in relief, and then groaned with the thought of what he now must do.

Back at the Castle Carlisle, all the Lords and Ladies were eating and drinking and gossiping when King Arthur returned. As usual, when he was announced, they all turned to see their King as he came in the door. When they saw King Arthur's face, when they saw the way he was walking, they all fell silent. Arthur was silent as well, as he walked through the great hall and into his own chambers. Queen Guenevere followed him in; "My Lord, my husband, my King, what is the matter?"

"I cannot tell you."

"My Lord, if you cannot tell me, your wife and Queen, who can you tell?"

And so he told her: about how the riddle was actually Sir Gromer's threat on his life, about the loathly Lady Ragnell, and about what he now had to do. As he was telling the story, the Lords and Ladies of the castle, who were curious and concerned too, were gathering around the door of his chamber to listen in on the story. When Arthur finished, the married Lords were so grateful to be married, and many of the unmarried Lords were sneaking off, wanting nothing to do with this Lady Ragnell. All but one, Arthur's youngest, kindest, and most brave knight, Sir Gawaine, who went right into Arthur's chamber, bent on one knee and said, "My Lord and King, I will marry the lady."

"Oh no Gawaine, you can't, you don't realize, she is hardly a woman at all, she is. . ."

"My King this is not for me or even for you, this is for Britain. We have no choice."

And so Gawaine and Arthur went off to collect Lady Ragnell, while all the others started preparing for the wedding. They got the cooks cooking, they started laying the tables, gathering the musicians and priest, all the while running to the window, anxious to get a glimpse of this loathly lady.

A cry rang through the castle: "They're coming, they're coming," and they all ran to the windows and the door. Lady Ragnell rode out of the woods and they all groaned as one when they first looked on her ravaged figure. All but Queen Guenevere, who walked out, and escorted Lady Ragnell into the castle, and up to the priest.

And so the priest married Sir Gawaine to Lady Ragnell. After the ceremony the musicians played and the food was laid out. But the Lord's and Ladies had little heart to dance, nor stomach to eat. After some half-hearted nibbles and waltzing, one by one the Lords and Ladies made excuses of fatigue and lateness and left the hall, leaving only King Arthur, Queen Guenevere, Sir Gawaine and Lady Ragnell.

And now it was time for Sir Gawaine and Lady Ragnell to go to their wedding chamber. Queen Guenevere escorted Lady Ragnell to the door, and kissed her goodnight; once on each cheek. King Arthur walked with Sir Gawain to the door of the wedding room and wordlessly hugged him, full of the horror of what Gawaine now had to live, and sleep with.

When Gawaine went into the room there was one candle burning, and Lady Ragnell was already in bed. Gawaine blew out the candle, got into the bed, turned his back to his bride, and prepared to go to sleep, when, out of the darkness, he heard Lady Ragnell's voice: "Gawaine, what about my wedding kiss?"

And so Sir Gawaine turned, and kissed Lady Ragnell.

Suddenly there was some kind of movement in the bed. Gawaine jumped out of the bed and lit a candle. There, sitting on the edge of his bed, was the most beautiful woman.

"Who are you, and where is my wife?" said Gawaine.

"I am your wife, Gawaine. For by agreeing to marry me, by giving me the wedding kiss, you have broken the spell that my brother, Sir Gromer, laid on me years ago, turning me into the beast you brought back from the forest."

"Oh, wonderful." sighed Gawaine.

~~"But wait, the spell is broken only halfway. For now I will be beautiful by night~~
as you see me now, when we share our wedding bed, and ugly by day when we
go out amongst the people; or I will be beautiful by day when we go out
amongst the people, and ugly by night when we share our wedding bed. The
choice, Gawaine, is yours."

"Oh no my Lady, the choice is yours."

"Oh Gawaine . . . Oh Gawaine. By giving that one true answer you have broken
the spell forever. For now I will be beautiful by day and by night."

And so she was. And so Gawaine and Lady Ragnell lived together peacefully,
and happily, ever after.

* THE END *

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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

One of the greatest works of medieval literature is the verse romance called *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, probably composed about 1370. The unknown author of this work, who wrote in a northwestern dialect of Middle English and in a consciously old-fashioned, or archaic, style, is known simply as the Gawain poet or the Pearl poet, because he is thought by many to have also written *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Purity*, three poems contained in the same manuscript with *Sir Gawain*. Whoever this poet was, he succeeded in transforming popular romance into great art.

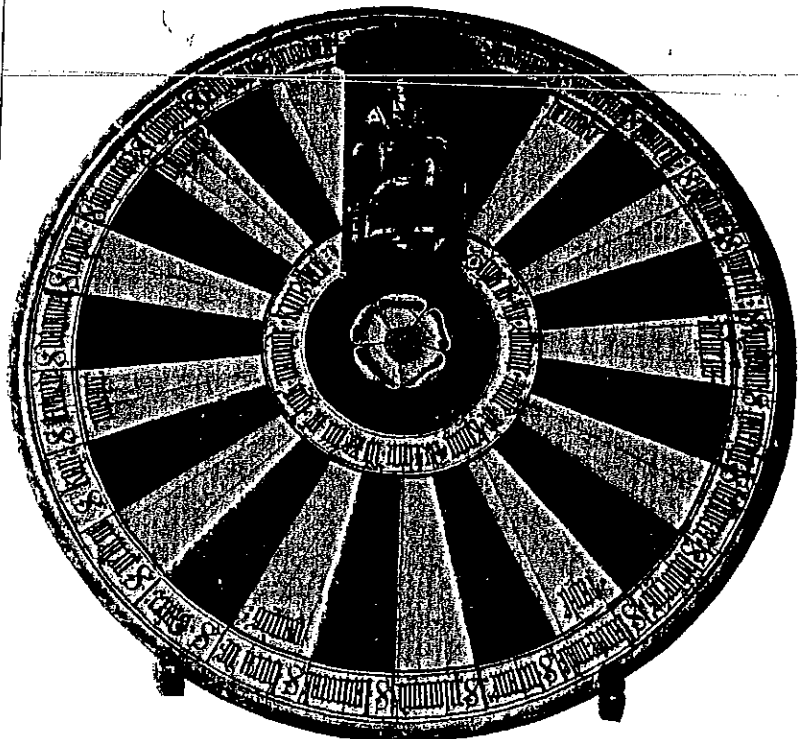
Romances (see page 147) are narratives set in a world where the ordinary laws of nature are suspended, and where idealized heroes fight the forces of evil. The basic narrative pattern of the romance is the **quest**, in which a hero undertakes a perilous journey in search of something of great value.

Romances are often too incredible for modern readers, too lacking in the realistic details of life we have come to expect of literature. Yet in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we feel the gripping reality of sexual temptation and of life in the medieval castle. This poem is a controlled, unified narrative of great power that speaks to us still.

In *Gawain* we have the model of the chivalric hero whose character is being tested. On trial are the virtues of courage, fidelity, and sexual morality. This is a serious romance, not a frivolous one, whose purpose is clearly to teach a moral lesson. Yet the hero does not have unlimited powers. Gawain is a human being who, like all of us, is limited in his moral and physical strength.

This powerful and precise translation is by the American writer John Gardner (see page 38).

The Round Table at Winchester Castle (possibly 13th century). The table was probably painted like this during the reign of Henry VII: The Tudor rose and the Tudor colors of green and white are reminders that the royal family claimed descendancy from King Arthur. Malory believed Winchester was the site of Camelot.



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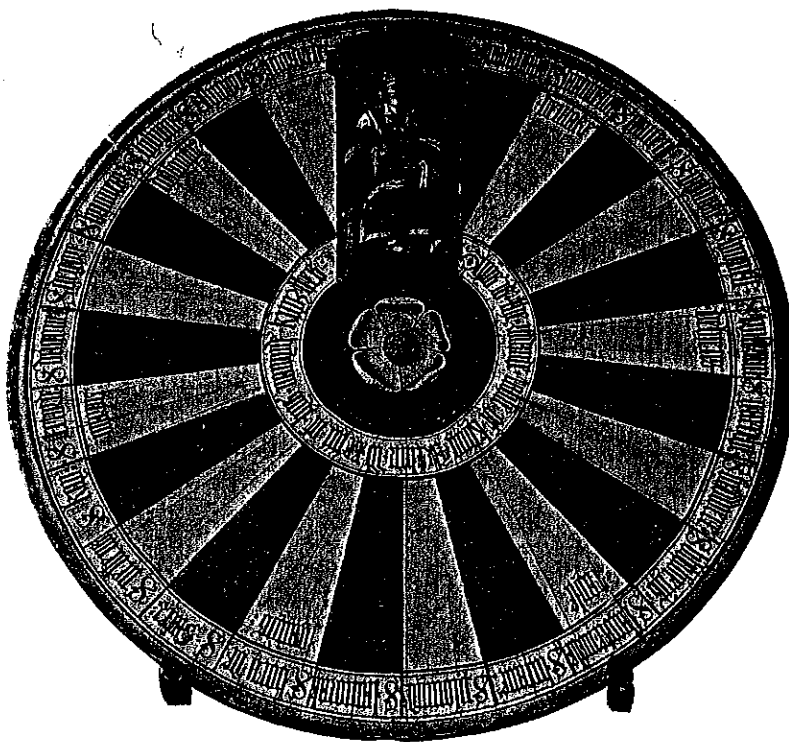
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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was written toward the end of the Middle Ages, when the ideals of knightly conduct—courage, loyalty, and courtesy—were just beginning to erode. As you read the poem, look for clues to the author's attitude toward those ideals. Does he respect them? Ridicule them? See them as desirable but unattainable?

As *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* opens, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table are feasting. Suddenly an enormous green stranger bursts in. King Arthur greets the Green

Knight and asks him to state his business. The knight, after a few scornful words about the manliness of the knights of Arthur's court, says he only wishes to play a New Year's game. He challenges any knight there to agree to "exchange one blow for another" and he will give that knight his gisarme, his two-bladed ax. The stranger says he will stand for the first blow; the knight must agree to let the Green Knight have *his* turn in a year and a day. Gawain accepts the challenge—no other knight except Arthur himself has dared to.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Part One

On the ground, the Green Knight got himself into
position,
His head bent forward a little, the bare flesh showing,
His long and lovely locks laid over his crown
So that any man there might note the naked neck.
5 Sir Gawain laid hold of the ax and he hefted it high,
His pivot foot thrown forward before him on the floor,
And then, swiftly, he slashed at the naked neck;
The sharp of the battleblade shattered asunder the bones
And sank through the shining fat and slit it in two,
10 And the bit of the bright steel buried itself in the ground.
The fair head fell from the neck to the floor of the hall
And the people all kicked it away as it came near their
feet.
The blood splashed up from the body and glistened on
the green,
But he never faltered or fell for all of that,
15 But swiftly he started forth upon stout shanks
And rushed to reach out, where the King's retainers
stood,
Caught hold of the lovely head, and lifted it up,
And leaped to his steed and snatched up the reins of
the bridle,
Stepped into stirrups of steel and, striding aloft,
20 He held his head by the hair, high, in his hand;
And the stranger sat there as steadily in his saddle
As a man entirely unharmed, although he was headless
on his steed.
He turned his trunk about,
That baleful body that bled,
25 And many were faint with fright
When all his say was said.

He held his head in his hand up high before him,
 Addressing the face to the dearest of all on the dais;
 And the eyelids lifted wide, and the eyes looked out,
 And the mouth said just this much, as you may now
 30 hear:
 "Look that you go, Sir Gawain, as good as your word,
 And seek till you find me, as loyally, my friend,
 As you've sworn in this hall to do, in the hearing of the
 knights.
 Come to the Green Chapel, I charge you, and take
 35 A stroke the same as you've given, for well you deserve
 To be readily requited on New Year's morn.
 Many men know me, the Knight of the Green Chapel;
 Therefore if you seek to find me, you shall not fail.
 Come or be counted a coward, as is fitting."
 40 Then with a rough jerk he turned the reins
 And haled away through the hall door, his head in his
 hand,
 And fire of the flint flew out from the hooves of the foal.
 To what kingdom he was carried no man there knew,
 No more than they knew what country it was he came
 from. What then?
 45 The King and Gawain there
 Laugh at the thing and grin;
 And yet, it was an affair
 Most marvelous to men.

The next year, just before Christmas, Gawain sets off to honor his pledge. Through moors and forests and mountains he rides, searching for the Green Knight. One day he comes upon the most beautiful castle he has ever seen. The lord of the castle welcomes him and promises to help him find the Green Knight. But he urges Gawain first to rest a few days in the castle with him and his lady.

Gawain's host then proposes an unusual "game." He will go hunting each day. Whatever he wins in the hunt, he will give to Gawain when he returns. In turn, Gawain must promise to give the lord whatever he has won that day.

Twice the lord goes hunting, and each time the lord leaves the castle, his wife secretly visits Gawain's room and tries to seduce him. Though Gawain resists the lady and exchanges only innocent kisses with her, he has become greatly alarmed. When the host returns from his hunts and gives Gawain what he won that day, Gawain, true to his promises, gives the host in return the innocent kisses.

Now the Lord goes out to hunt for the third morning. Gawain is in his room asleep, worried about many things.

From the depths of his mournful sleep Sir Gawain
 muttered,
 50 A man who was suffering throngs of sorrowful thoughts
 Of how Destiny would that day deal him his doom

At the Green Chapel, where he dreamed he was facing
the giant
Whose blow he must abide without further debate.
But soon our rosy knight had recovered his wits;
55 He struggled up out of his sleep and responded in haste.
The lovely lady came laughing sweetly,
Fell over his fair face and fondly kissed him;
Sir Gawain welcomed her worthily and with pleasure;
He found her so glorious, so attractively dressed,
60 So faultless in every feature, her colors so fine
Welling joy rushed up in his heart at once.
Their sweet and subtle smiles swept them upward like
wings
And all that passed between them was music and bliss
and delight.
How sweet was now their state!
65 Their talk, how loving and light!
But the danger might have been great
Had Mary^o not watched her knight!

For that priceless princess pressed our poor hero so hard
And drove him so close to the line that she left him no
choice
But to take the full pleasure she offered or flatly refuse
70 her;
He feared for his name, lest men call him a common
churl,
But he feared even more what evil might follow his fall
If he dared to betray his just duty as guest to his host.
God help me, thought the knight, *I can't let it happen!*
75 With a loving little laugh he parried her lunges,
Those words of undying love she let fall from her lips.
Said the lady then, "It's surely a shameful thing
If you'll lie with a lady like this yet not love her at all—
The woman most broken-hearted in all the wide world!
80 Is there someone else? Some lady you love still more
To whom you've sworn your faith and so firmly fixed
Your heart that you can't break free? I can't believe it!
But tell me if it's so. I beg you—truly—
By all the loves in life, let me know, and hide nothing
with guile."
85 The knight said, "By Saint John,"
And smooth was Gawain's smile,
"I've pledged myself to none,
Nor will I for awhile."

"Of all the words you might have said," said she,
90 "That's surely cruelest: But alas, I'm answered.
Kiss me kindly, then, and I'll go from you.
I'll mourn through life as one who loved too much."

67. Mary: the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus.
A cult of the Virgin was very strong among
the knights.

95 She bent above him, sighing, and softly kissed him:
Then, drawing back once more, she said as she stood,
"But my love, since we must part, be kind to me:
Leave me some little remembrance—if only a glove—
To bring back fond memories sometimes and soften my
sorrow."

100 "Truly," said he, "with all my heart I wish
I had here with me the handsomest treasure I own,
For surely you have deserved on so many occasions
A gift more fine than any gift I could give you;
But as to my giving some token of trifling value,
It would hardly suit your great honor to have from your
knight

105 A glove as a treasured keepsake and gift from Gawain;
And I've come here on my errand to countries unknown
Without any attendants with treasures in their trunks;
It sadly grieves me, for love's sake, that it's so,
But every man must do what he must and not murmur
or pine."

110 "Ah no, my prince of all honors,"
Said she so fair and fine,
"Though I get nothing of yours,
You shall have something of mine."

115 She held toward him a ring of the yellowest gold
And, standing aloft on the band, a stone like a star
From which flew splendid beams like the light of the sun;
And mark you well, it was worth a rich king's ransom.
But right away he refused it, replying in haste,
"My lady gay, I can hardly take gifts at the moment;
Having nothing to give, I'd be wrong to take gifts in
turn."

120 She implored him again, still more earnestly, but again
He refused it and swore on his knighthood that he could
take nothing.

Grieved that he still would not take it, she told him then:
"If taking my ring would be wrong on account of its
worth,

And being so much in my debt would be bothersome to
you,

125 I'll give you merely this sash that's of slighter value."
She swiftly unfastened the sash that encircled her waist,
Tied around her fair tunic, inside her bright mantle;
It was made of green silk and was marked of gleaming
gold

Embroidered along the edges, ingeniously stitched.
This too she held out to the knight, and she earnestly
begged him

130 To take it, trifling as it was, to remember her by.
But again he said no, there was nothing at all he could
take,

Neither treasure nor token, until such time as the Lord
Had granted him some end to his adventure.
135 "And therefore, I pray you, do not be displeased,
But give up, for I cannot grant it, however fair or right.
I know your worth and price,
And my debt's by no means slight;
I swear through fire and ice
140 To be your humble knight."

"Do you lay aside this silk," said the lady then,
"Because it seems unworthy—as well it may?
Listen. Little as it is, it seems less in value,
But he who knew what charms are woven within it
145 Might place a better price on it, perchance.
For the man who goes to battle in this green lace,
As long as he keeps it looped around him,
No man under Heaven can hurt him, whoever may try,
For nothing on earth, however uncanny, can kill him."
The knight cast about in distress, and it came to his
150 heart
This might be a treasure indeed when the time came to
take
The blow he had bargained to suffer beside the Green
Chapel.
If the gift meant remaining alive, it might well be worth
it;
So he listened in silence and suffered the lady to speak,
And she pressed the sash upon him and begged him to
155 take it,
And Gawain did, and she gave him the gift with great
pleasure
And begged him, for her sake, to say not a word,
And to keep it hidden from her lord. And he said he
would,
That except for themselves, this business would never
be known to a man.
160 He thanked her earnestly,
And boldly his heart now ran;
And now a third time she
Leaned down and kissed her man.

When the lord returns from the third hunt, he gives Gawain a fox, and Gawain in return gives him three kisses, but not the lady's sash. The next day is New Year's Day, when Gawain must rendezvous with the Green Knight. Snow and sleet fall that night, and howling winds pile up huge drifts of snow. Before dawn, Gawain dresses in burnished armor and a red velvet cloak, winding the lady's green sash around him twice. He leaves the castle with a servant to show him the way. The servant urges him not to keep his appointment, for he will surely die, but Gawain refuses.

Part Two

He put his spurs to Gringolet,^o plunged down the path,
Shoved through the heavy thicket grown up by the
165 woods
And rode down the steep slope to the floor of the valley;
He looked around him then—a strange, wild place,
And not a sign of a chapel on any side
But only steep, high banks surrounding him,
170 And great, rough knots of rock and rugged crags
That scraped the passing clouds, as it seemed to him.
He heaved at the heavy reins to hold back his horse
And squinted in every direction in search of the Chapel,
And still he saw nothing except—and this was strange—
175 A small green hill all alone, a sort of barrow,^o
A low, smooth bulge on the bank of the brimming creek
That flowed from the foot of a waterfall,
And the water in the pool was bubbling as if it were
boiling.
Sir Gawain urged Gringolet on till he came to the mound
180 And lightly dismounted and made the reins secure
On the great, thick limb of a gnarled and ancient tree;
Then he went up to the barrow and walked all around it,
Wondering in his wits what on earth it might be.
It had at each end and on either side an entrance,
185 And patches of grass were growing all over the thing,
And all the inside was hollow—an old, old cave
Or the cleft of some ancient crag, he couldn't tell which
it was.
“Whoo, Lord!” thought the knight,
“Is *this* the fellow's place?
190 Here the Devil might
Recite his midnight mass.

“Dear God,” thought Gawain, “the place is deserted
enough!
And it's ugly enough, all overgrown with weeds!
Well might it amuse that marvel of green
195 To do his devotions here, in his devilish way!
In my five senses I fear it's the Fiend himself
Who's brought me to meet him here to murder me.
May fire and fury befall this fiendish Chapel,
As cursed a kirk^o as I ever yet came across!”
200 With his helmet on his head and his lance in hand
He leaped up onto the roof of the rock-walled room
And, high on that hill, he heard, from an echoing rock
Beyond the pool, on the hillside, a horrible noise.
Brrrack! It clattered in the cliffs as if to cleave them,
205 A sound like a grindstone grinding on a scythe!
Brrrack! It whirred and rattled like water on a mill
wheel!

164. Gringolet: his horse.

175. barrow: a grave mound.

199. kirk: church.

Brrrrrack! It rushed and rang till your blood ran cold.
And then: "Oh God," thought Gawain, "it grinds, I
think,
For me—a blade prepared for the blow I must take as
my right!

210 God's will be done! But here!
He may well get his knight,
But still, no use in fear;
I won't fall dead of fright!"

And then Sir Gawain roared in a ringing voice,
"Where is the hero who swore he'd be here to meet
me?

215 Sir Gawain the Good is come to the Green Chapel!
If any man would meet me, make it now,
For it's now or never, I've no wish to dawdle here
long."

"Stay there!" called someone high above his head,
220 "I'll pay you promptly all that I promised before."
But still he went on with that whetting noise a while,
Turning again to his grinding before he'd come down.
At last, from a hole by a rock he came out into sight,
Came plunging out of his den with a terrible weapon,
225 A huge new Danish ax to deliver his blow with,
With a vicious swine of a bit bent back to the handle,
Filed to a razor's edge and four foot long,
Not one inch less by the length of that gleaming lace.
The great Green Knight was garbed as before,
230 Face, legs, hair, beard, all as before but for this:
That now he walked the world on his own two legs,
The ax handle striking the stone like a walking stave.
When the knight came down to the water he would not
wade

235 But vaulted across on his ax, then with awful strides
Came fiercely over the field filled all around with snow.
Sir Gawain met him there
And bowed—but none too low!
Said the other, "I see, sweet sir,
You go where you say you'll go!

"Gawain," the Green Knight said, "may God be your
240 guard!

You're very welcome indeed, sir, here at my place;
You've timed your travel, my friend, as a true man
should.

You recall the terms of the contract drawn up between
us:

245 At this time a year ago you took your chances,
And I'm pledged now, this New Year, to make you my
payment.



Sir Gawain. From a French manuscript of *Lancelot du Lac* (14th C.).

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And here we are in this valley, all alone,
 And no man here to part us, proceed as we may;
 Heave off your helmet then, and have here your pay;
 And debate no more with me than I did then
 When you severed my head from my neck with a single
 250 swipe."

"Never fear," said Gawain, "by God who gave
 Me life, I'll raise no complaint at the grimness of it;
 But take your single stroke, and I'll stand still
 And allow you to work as you like and not oppose you
 here."

255 He bowed toward the ground
 And let his skin show clear;
 However his heart might pound,
 He would not show his fear.

260 Quickly then the man in the green made ready,
 Grabbed up his keen-ground ax to strike Sir Gawain:
 With all the might in his body he bore it aloft

And sharply brought it down as if to slay him;
 Had he made it fall with the force he first intended
 He would have stretched out the strongest man on
 earth.

265 But Sir Gawain cast a side glance at the ax
 As it glided down to give him his Kingdom Come,^o
 And his shoulders jerked away from the iron a little,
 And the Green Knight caught the handle, holding it
 back,
 And mocked the prince with many a proud reproof:
 "You can't be Gawain," he said, "who's thought so
 270 good,
 A man who's never been daunted on hill or dale!
 For look how you flinch for fear before anything's felt!
 I never heard tell that Sir Gawain was ever a coward!
 I never moved a muscle when *you* came down;
 275 In Arthur's hall I never so much as winced.
 My head fell off at my feet, yet I never flickered;
 But you! You tremble at heart before you're touched!
 I'm bound to be called a better man than you, then, my
 lord."
 Said Gawain, "I shied once:
 280 No more. You have my word.
 But if my head falls to the stones
 It cannot be restored.

"But be brisk, man, by your faith, and come to the
 point!
 Deal out my doom if you can, and do it at once,
 285 For I'll stand for one good stroke, and I'll start no more
 Until your ax has hit—and that I swear."
 "Here goes, then," said the other, and heaves it aloft
 And stands there waiting, scowling like a madman;
 He swings down sharp, then suddenly stops again,
 290 Holds back the ax with his hand before it can hurt.
 And Gawain stands there stirring not even a nerve;
 He stood there still as a stone or the stock of a tree
 That's wedged in rocky ground by a hundred roots.
 O, merrily then he spoke, the man in green:
 295 "Good! You've got your heart back! Now I can hit you.
 May all that glory the good King Arthur gave you
 Prove efficacious now—if it ever can—
 And save your neck." In rage Sir Gawain shouted,
 "Hit me, hero! I'm right up to here with your threats!
 300 Is it *you* that's the cringing coward after all?"
 "Whoo!" said the man in green, "he's wrathful, too!
 No pauses, then; I'll pay up my pledge at once, I vow!"
 He takes his stride to strike
 And lifts his lip and brow;
 305 It's not a thing Gawain can like,
 For nothing can save him now!

266. his Kingdom Come: his afterlife.

He raises that ax up lightly and flashes it down,
And that blinding bit bites in at the knight's bare neck—
But hard as he hammered it down, it hurt him no more
310 Than to nick the nape of his neck, so it split the skin;
The sharp blade slit to the flesh through the shiny hide,
And red blood shot to his shoulders and spattered the
ground.

And when Gawain saw his blood where it blinked in the
snow
He sprang from the man with a leap to the length of a
spear;

315 He snatched up his helmet swiftly and slapped it on,
Shifted his shield into place with a jerk of his shoulders,
And snapped his sword out faster than sight; said
boldly—

And, mortal born of his mother that he was,
There was never on earth a man so happy by half—
320 "No more strokes, my friend; you've had your swing!
I've stood one swipe of your ax without resistance;
If you offer me anymore, I'll repay you at once
With all the force and fire I've got—as you will see.

I take one stroke, that's all,
325 For that was the compact we
Arranged in Arthur's hall;
But now, no more for me!"

The Green Knight remained where he stood, relaxing on
his ax—

Settled the shaft on the rocks and leaned on the sharp
end—

330 And studied the young man standing there, shoulders
hunched,

And considered that staunch and doughty^o stance he
took,

Undaunted yet, and in his heart he liked it;
And then he said merrily, with a mighty voice—

335 With a roar like rushing wind he reproved the knight—
"Here, don't be such an ogre on your ground!

Nobody here has behaved with bad manners toward you
Or done a thing except as the contract said.

I owed you a stroke, and I've struck; consider yourself
Well paid. And now I release you from all further duties.

340 If I'd cared to hustle, it may be, perchance, that I might
Have hit somewhat harder, and then you might well be
cross!

The first time I lifted my ax it was lighthearted sport,
I merely feinted and made no mark, as was right,
For you kept our pact of the first night with honor
345 And abided by your word and held yourself true to me,
Giving me all you owed as a good man should.
I feinted a second time, friend, for the morning

331. doughty: brave.

You kissed my pretty wife twice and returned me the
kisses;
And so for the first two days, mere feints, nothing more
severe.

350 A man who's true to his word,
There's nothing he needs to fear;
You failed me, though, on the third
Exchange, so I've tapped you here.

355 "That sash you wear by your scabbard belongs to me;
My own wife gave it to you, as I ought to know.
I know, too, of your kisses and all your words
And my wife's advances, for I myself arranged them.
It was I who sent her to test you. I'm convinced
You're the finest man that ever walked this earth.
360 As a pearl is of greater price than dry white peas,
So Gawain indeed stands out above all other knights.
But you lacked a little, sir; you were less than loyal;
But since it was not for the sash itself or for lust
But because you loved your life, I blame you less."
365 Sir Gawain stood in a study a long, long while,
So miserable with disgrace that he wept within,
And all the blood of his chest went up to his face
And he shrank away in shame from the man's gentle
words.

The first words Gawain could find to say were these:
370 "Cursed be cowardice and covetousness both,
Villainy and vice that destroy all virtue!"
He caught at the knots of the girdle and loosened them
And fiercely flung the sash at the Green Knight.
"There, there's my fault! The foul fiend vex it!
375 Foolish cowardice taught me, from fear of your stroke,
To bargain, covetous, and abandon my kind,
The selflessness and loyalty suitable in knights;
Here I stand, faulty, and false, much as I've feared them,
Both of them, untruth and treachery; may they see
sorrow and care!
380 I can't deny my guilt;
My works shine none too fair!
Give me your good will
And henceforth I'll beware."

At that, the Green Knight laughed, saying graciously,
385 "Whatever harm I've had, I hold it amended
Since now you're confessed so clean, acknowledging
sins
And bearing the plain penance of my point;
I consider you polished as white and as perfectly clean
As if you had never fallen since first you were born.
390 and I give you, sir, this gold-embroidered girdle,

For the cloth is as green as my gown. Sir Gawain, think
On this when you go forth among great princes;
Remember our struggle here; recall to your mind
This rich token. Remember the Green Chapel.

395 And now, come on, let's both go back to my castle
And finish the New Year's revels with feasting and joy,
not strife,

I beg you," said the lord,
And said, "As for my wife,
She'll be your friend, no more
400 A threat against your life."

Sir Gawain is tempted by the lady
of the castle. From an English
manuscript (c. 1400).

The British Museum.



Like Coleridge's story about the Ancient Mariner, this ballad attempts to recreate the air of mystery and enchantment associated with the medieval ballad. Like many of Wordsworth's ballads, it presents its story with a seemingly direct simplicity. The poem looks back to older literature, but the story told in songlike verse is just as common in today's folk music repertoire.

The figure of the woman as temptress has appeared and reappeared in many stories. In most tellings, the woman is irresistibly beautiful, but emotionally cold. Indifferent to the fate of those

who come under her spell, she vanishes as swiftly and mysteriously as she arrives, leaving her victim spiritless and deprived of his manhood. In this poem, the man is also threatened by a fear of mortality, as suggested by the "death-pale" kings, princes, and warriors in the dream.

The poem's title, translated as "The Beautiful Woman Without Pity," repeats the title of a poem by the French poet Alain Chartier. Keats's poem, written in the spring of 1819, probably was influenced by Keats's own fascination with the "self-destroying" experiences of intense passion.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci

1

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge^o has withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

2

5 O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woebegone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

3

10 I see a lily on thy brow
With anguish moist and fever dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

4

15 I met a lady in the meads,^o
Full beautiful, a fairy's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

5

20 I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;^o
She looked at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.

3. sedge: reedy plants.

13. meads: meadowlands.

18. zone: belt or girdle.



6

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing—
A fairy's song.

7

25 She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew,²⁶
And sure in language strange she said—
I love thee true.

8

30 She took me to her elfin grot,²⁹
And there she wept, and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci by
Walter Crane (19th century).

26. manna dew: probably a sweet syrup
made from tree sap.

29. grot: cave.

- And there she lulled me asleep,
 And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!
 35 The latest° dream I ever dreamed
 On the cold hill's side.

10

- I saw pale kings, and princes too,
 Pale warriors, death pale were they all;
 They cried—"La belle dame sans merci
 40 Hath thee in thrall!"°

11

- I saw their starved lips in the gloam°
 With horrid warning gaped wide,
 And I awoke and found me here
 On the cold hill's side.

12

- 45 And this is why I sojourn here,
 Alone and palely loitering,
 Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
 And no birds sing.

35. latest: last.

40. in thrall: enslaved.

41. gloam: twilight.

Responding to the Poem

Analyzing the Poem

Identifying Details

1. Who are the two speakers in the poem? Where does the first speaker stop and the other start? What is the first speaker's question?
2. At the opening of the poem, what time of year is it?
3. What **images** help you visualize the knight?
4. According to the knight's story, what happened when he went off with the enchantress? What did he learn from his dream?

Interpreting Meanings

5. What do you infer happened to the pale kings and princes?
6. Where does Keats vary the **meter** of each ballad stanza? What is the effect of this change in rhythm?

Writing About the Poem

A Creative Response

1. **Setting a Ballad to Music.** Try to improvise a musical setting for "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." You do not need to know musical notation: Simply try to imagine what you think would be an effective melody for each stanza.
2. **Writing a Short Story.** Are you satisfied with the knight's explanation of his problem? Write your own version of what "ails" the knight-at-arms.

Tennyson wrote this ballad in 1832 and revised it extensively in 1842. He said of the imaginary Lady in the poem: "Her newborn love for something, for someone in the wide world from which she had been so long secluded, takes her out of the region of shadows into that of realities." The

contrast of shadow and reality is one of several oppositions in the poem. As you read this ballad, look also for contrasts between the Lady's isolation and the activity of the broader community, between her work as an artist and the labor of the reapers.



The Lady of Shalott by John William Waterhouse (1888). Oil.

The Tate Gallery, London.

The Lady of Shalott

Part I

On either side the river lie
 Long fields of barley and of rye,
 That clothe the wold³ and meet the sky;
 And through the field the road runs by
 5 To many-towered Camelot;⁵
 And up and down the people go,
 Gazing where the lilies blow⁷
 Round an island there below,
 The island of Shalott.

3. wold: a plain or open hilly region.

5. Camelot: a legendary city, site of King Arthur's court and the capital of Arthur's kingdom.

7. blow: blossom.

10 Willows whiten,^o aspens quiver,
 Little breezes dusk and shiver
 Through the wave that runs forever
 By the island in the river
 Flowing down to Camelot.
 15 Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
 Overlook a space of flowers,
 And the silent isle imbowers^o
 The Lady of Shalott.

 20 By the margin, willow-veiled,
 Slide the heavy barges trailed
 By slow horses; and unhailed
 The shallop^o flitteth silken-sailed
 Skimming down to Camelot:
 But who hath seen her wave her hand?
 25 Or at the casement seen her stand?
 Or is she known in all the land,
 The Lady of Shalott?

 Only reapers, reaping early
 In among the bearded barley,
 30 Hear a song that echoes cheerly
 From the river winding clearly,
 Down to towered Camelot:
 And by the moon the reaper weary,
 Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
 35 Listening, whispers "'Tis the fairy
 Lady of Shalott."

Part II

There she weaves by night and day
 A magic web with colors gay.
 She has heard a whisper say,
 40 A curse is on her if she stay
 To look down to Camelot.
 She knows not what the curse may be,
 And so she weaveth steadily,
 And little other care hath she,
 45 The Lady of Shalott.

 And moving through a mirror clear^o
 That hangs before her all the year,
 Shadows of the world appear.
 There she sees the highway near
 50 Winding down to Camelot;
 There the river eddy whirls,
 And there the surly village churls,^o
 And the red cloaks of market girls,
 Pass onward from Shalott.

10. **whiten:** show the white undersides of their leaves, blown by the wind.

17. **imbowers:** shelters with trees, gardens, and flowers.

22. **shallop:** a small, open boat.

46. **mirror clear:** Weavers worked on the back of the tapestry so that they could easily knot their yarns. In order to see their designs, weavers looked in a mirror that reflected the front of the tapestry.

52. **churls:** peasants; country folk.

55 Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
 An abbot on an ambling pad,[°]
 Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,
 Or long-haired page in crimson clad,
 Goes by to towered Camelot;
 60 And sometimes through the mirror blue
 The knights come riding two and two:
 She hath no loyal knight and true,
 The Lady of Shalott.

But in her web she still delights
 65 To weave the mirror's magic sights,
 For often through the silent nights
 A funeral, with plumes and lights
 And music, went to Camelot;
 Or when the moon was overhead,
 70 Came two young lovers lately wed:
 "I am half sick of shadows," said
 The Lady of Shalott.

Part III

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
 He rode between the barley sheaves,
 75 The sun came dazzling through the leaves,
 And flamed upon the brazen greaves[°]
 Of bold Sir Lancelot.
 A red-cross knight[°] for ever kneeled
 To a lady in his shield,
 80 That sparkled on the yellow field,
 Beside remote Shalott.

The gemmy bridle glittered free,
 Like to some branch of stars we see
 Hung in the golden Galaxy.[°]
 85 The bridle bells rang merrily
 As he rode down to Camelot:
 And from his blazoned baldric[°] slung
 A mighty silver bugle hung,
 And as he rode his armor rung.
 90 Beside remote Shalott.

All in the blue unclouded weather
 Thick-jeweled shone the saddle-leather,
 The helmet and the helmet-feather
 Burned like one burning flame together,
 95 As he rode down to Camelot.
 As often through the purple night,
 Below the starry clusters bright,
 Some bearded meteor, trailing light,
 Moves over still Shalott.

56. **pad:** an easy-gaited horse.

76. **greaves:** armor for the legs from ankle to knee.

78. **red-cross knight:** The red cross is the emblem of St. George, England's patron saint.

84. **Galaxy:** the Milky Way.

87. **blazoned baldric:** a richly decorated belt worn diagonally over one shoulder for carrying a bugle or sword.

100 His broad clear brow in sunlight glowed;
On burnished hooves his warhorse trode;
From underneath his helmet flowed
His coal-black curls as on he rode,
As he rode down to Camelot.
105 From the bank and from the river
He flashed into the crystal mirror,
"Tirra lirra," by the river
Sang Sir Lancelot.

She left the web, she left the loom,
110 She made three paces through the room,
She saw the water lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She looked down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
115 The mirror cracked from side to side;
"The curse is come upon me," cried
The Lady of Shalott.

Part IV

In the stormy east-wind straining,
The pale yellow woods were waning,
120 The broad stream in his banks complaining,
Heavily the low sky raining
Over towered Camelot;
Down she came and found a boat
Beneath a willow left afloat,
125 And round about the prow she wrote
The Lady of Shalott.

And down the river's dim expanse
Like some bold seer in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance—
130 With a glassy countenance
Did she look to Camelot.
And at the closing of the day
She loosed the chain, and down she lay;
The broad stream bore her far away,
135 The Lady of Shalott.

Lying, robed in snowy white
That loosely flew to left and right—
The leaves upon her falling light—
Through the noises of the night
140 She floated down to Camelot:
And as the boathead wound along
The willowy hills and fields among,
They heard her singing her last song,
The Lady of Shalott.

- 145 Heard a carol, mournful, holy,
Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,
Till her blood was frozen slowly,
And her eyes were darkened wholly,
Turned to towered Camelot.
- 150 For ere she reached upon the tide
The first house by the waterside,
Singing in her song she died,
The Lady of Shalott.
- Under tower and balcony,
By garden wall and gallery,
A gleaming shape she floated by,
Dead-pale between the houses high,
Silent into Camelot.
- 155 Out upon the wharfs they came,
Knight and burgher,^o lord and dame,
And round the prow they read her name,
The Lady of Shalott.
- Who is this? and what is here?
And in the lighted palace near
165 Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they crossed themselves for fear,
All the knights at Camelot:
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face;
170 God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott."

160. burgher: citizen.

A Comment on the Poem

Readers may differ in regard to the meaning or moral of the simple story this richly ornamented and carefully wrought poem tells. But no one should disregard the clue offered by Tennyson himself: "Her newborn love for something," he said of the Lady of Shalott, "for someone in the wide world from which she had been so long secluded, takes her out of the region of shadows into that of realities." He is referring particularly to the last lines of Part II when, having watched a young bride and groom in the moonlight, the Lady declares that she is "half sick of shadows."

Like the weaving that perpetually occupies the heroine—"A magic web with colors gay"—the narrative moves from scene to scene with a tapestried grace that quietly

captures the romantic heart of the Age of Chivalry. The Lady is appropriately beautiful, wan, sequestered, and mysterious. Sir Lancelot, panoplied to the hilt with every object in the book of heraldry, is less a man than a vision of a man. And Camelot itself, "many-towered," exists like a little city afloat in time.

The "mirror clear" in line 46 is crucial to both the poem's narrative line and to its meaning. In the custom of weavers, the Lady has placed this mirror in a spot facing the loom from which she is able to see at a glance how her work is going. But, for the purposes of the story, the more important function of the mirror is to allow the Lady glimpses or "Shadows of the world" in which she takes no part.

Trying to experience this immense poem by reading a canto of it is like trying to experience the ocean by looking at a teacup of seawater. However, Canto VIII of Book I can be taken as representative of one aspect of *The Faerie Queene*: its delight in heroic violence and the gusto with which it describes ugliness. This rhyme opens the canto and sums up its action:

Faire virgin to redeeme her deare
Brings Arthur to the fight:
Who slayes the Gyant, wounds the beast,
And strips Duessa quight.

The "faire virgin" is Una, or Truth. She has been traveling with "her deare," a Knight called Redcrosse, but she has accidentally become separated from him. Without Una, Redcrosse has fallen into the coils of a beautiful but sinister woman called Duessa, or Falsehood. Duessa's boyfriend, a giant called Orgoglio (ôr·gō'lē·ō), or Pride, has thrown Redcrosse into his dungeon. Meantime, Redcrosse's Dwarf has run off to locate Una. As the canto opens, Una is bringing Prince Arthur and his Squire to rescue Redcrosse. (Reading aloud will make the language easier to understand.)

from *The Faerie Queene*

1

Aye me, how many perils doe enfold
The righteous man, to make him daily fall?
Were not, that heavenly grace doth him uphold,
And stedfast truth acquite° him out of all.
Her love is firme, her care continuall,
So oft as he through his owne foolish pride,
Or weaknesse is to sinfull bands° made thrall:°
Else should this Redcrosse knight in bands have dyde,
For whose deliverance she this Prince doth thither guide.

2

They sadly traveiled thus, untill they came
Nigh to a castle builded strong and hie:
Then cryde the Dwarfe, "lo yonder is the same,
In which my Lord my liege doth luckless lie,
Thrall to that Gyants hatefull tyrannie:
Therefore, deare Sir, your mightie powres assay."
The noble knight alighted by and by°
From loftie steede, and bad the Ladie stay,
To see what end of fight should him befall that day.

3

So with the Squire, th' admirer of his might,
He marchèd forth towards that castle wall;
Whose gates he found fast shut, ne living wight°
To ward° the same, nor answere commers call.
Then tooke that Squire an horne of bugle small,
Which hong adowne his side in twisted gold,
And tassels gay. Wyde wonders over all
Of that same hornes great vertues weren told,
Which had approvèd° bene in uses manifold.

4. **acquite**: acquit, set free.

7. **bands**: bonds. **thrall**: prisoner.

16. **by and by**: at once.

21. **wight**: person.

22. **ward**: guard.

27. **approved**: proved.

4

- Was never wight, that heard that shrilling sound,
 But trembling feare did feele in every vaine;
 30 Three miles it might be easie heard around,
 And Ecchoes three answerd it selfe againe:
 No false enchauntment, nor deceitfull traine°
 Might once abide the terror of that blast,
 But presently° was voide and wholly vaine:°
 35 No gate so strong, no locke so firme and fast,
 But with that percing noise flew open quite, or brast.°

5

- The same before the Geants gate he blew,
 That all the castle quakèd from the ground,
 And every dore of freewill open flew.
 40 The Gyant selfe dismaièd with that sownd,
 Where he with his Duessa dalliance fownd,°
 In hast came rushing forth from inner bowre,
 With staring countenance sterne, as one astownd,°
 And staggering steps, to weet,° what suddin stowre°
 45 Had wrought that horror strange, and dared his dreaded
 powre.

6

- And after him the proud Duessa came,
 High mounted on her manyheaded beast,
 And every head with fyrie tongue did flame,
 And every head was crownèd on his creast,
 50 And bloudie mouthèd with late cruell feast.
 That when the knight beheld, his mightie shild
 Upon his manly arme he soone address,°
 And at him fiercely flew, with courage fild,
 And eger greedinesse° through every member thrid.

7

- Therewith the Gyant buckled him to fight,
 Inflamed with scornfull wrath and high disdaine,
 And lifting up his dreadfull club on hight,
 All armed with ragged snubbes° and knottie graine,
 55 Him thought at first encounter to have slaine.
 But wise and warie was that noble Pere,°
 And lightly leaping from so monstrous main,°
 Did faire avoide the violence him nere;
 60 It bootèd nought,° to thinke, such thunderbolts to beare.

8

- Ne shame he thought to shunne so hideous might:
 65 The idle° stroke, enforcing furious way,
 Missing the marke of his misaymèd sight
 Did fall to ground, and with his heaue sway°

32. traine: trap.

34. presently: immediately.
vaine: powerless.

36. brast: burst.

41. dalliance fownd: found amorous pleasure.

43. astownd: astonished.

44. weet: know. stowre: uproar.

52. address: places.

54. greedinesse: longing.

58. snubbes: knobs.

60. Pere: Peer.

61. main: might.

63. bootèd nought: did not pay.

65. idle: ill-aimed.

67. sway: force.

So deeply dinted in the driven clay,
 That three yardees deepe a furrow up did throw:
 70 The sad earth wounded with so sore assay,^o
 Did grone full grievous underneath the blow,
 And trembling with strange feare, did like an earthquake
 show.

9

As when almightie Jove in wrathfull mood,
 To wreake^o the guilt of mortall sins is bent,
 75 Hurles forth his thundring dart with deadly food,^o
 Enrold in flames, and smouldring dreriment,^o
 Through riven cloudes and molten firmament;^o
 The fierce threeforked engin^o making way,
 Both loftie towres and highest trees hath rent,
 80 And all that might his angrie passage stay,
 And shouting in the earth, casts up a mount of clay.

10

His boystrous^o club, so buried in the ground,
 He could not rearen up againe so light,^o
 But that the knight him at advantage found,
 85 And whiles he strove his combred clubbe to quight^o
 Out of the earth, with blade all burning bright
 He smote off his left arme, which like a blocke
 Did fall to ground, deprived of native might;
 Large streames of bloud out of the truncked stocke
 90 Forth gushed, like fresh water streame from riven rocke.

11

Dismaied with so desperate deadly wound,
 And eke impatient of unwonted paine,^o
 He loudly brayd with beastly yelling sound,
 That all the fields rebellowed againe;
 95 As great a noyse, as when in Cymbrian plaine^o
 An heard of Bulles, whom kindly rage^o doth sting,
 Do for the milkie mothers want^o complaine,
 And fill the fields with troublous bellowing,
 And neighbour woods around with hollow murmur ring.

Duessa sends her dragon to attack the knight. The Squire defends the knight, but Duessa uses her magic to paralyze the Squire. The knight rescues the Squire and attacks the dragon, tearing its monstrous scalp down to its teeth. The giant Orgoglio rescues Duessa as the dragon collapses beneath her. Her garments are stained with the dragon's filthy gore and the giant's feet are wading in the monster's blood. The giant now turns to the knight and, enraged with pain, deals him a forceful blow.

70. assay: blow.

74. wreake: punish.

75. food: feud.

76. dreriment: dreariness.

77. firmament: heavens.

78. engin: weapon.

82. boystrous: immense.

83. light: easily.

85. quight: release.

92. eke . . . paine: also suffering from unaccustomed pain.

95. Cymbrian plaine: a place in Denmark.

96. kindly rage: natural urge to procreate.

97. milkie mothers want: lack of cows.



Knight on Horseback Killing a Dragon by Walter Crane. Woodcut.

18

- 100 The force, which wont in two to be disperst,
 In one alone left^o hand he new unites,
 Which is through rage more strong than both were erst;
 With which his hideous club aloft he dites,^o
 And at his foe with furious rigour smites,
 105 That strongest Oake might seeme to overthrow:
 The stroke upon his shield so heavie lites,
 That to the ground it doubleth him full low:
 What mortall wight could ever beare so monstrous blow?

101. left: remaining. (His left arm was

103. dites: lifts.

19

- And in his fall his shield, that covered was,
 110 Did loose his vele^o by chaunce, and open flew:
 The light whereof, that heavens light did pas,^o
 Such blazing brightness through the aier threw,

110. his vele: its veil, covering.

111. pas: surpass.

That eye mote not the same endure to vew.
Which when the Gyaunt spyde with staring eye,
115 He downe let fall his arme, and soft withdrew
His weapon huge, that heavèd was on hye
For to have slaine the man, that on the ground did lye.

20

And eke the fruitfull-headed° beast, amazed
At flashing beames of that sunshiny shield,
120 Became starke blind, and all his senses dazed,
That downe he tumbled on the durtye field,
And seemed himselfe as conquerèd to yield.
Whom when his maistresse proud perceived to fall,
Whiles yet his feeble feet for faintnesse reeld,
125 Unto the Gyant loudly she gan call,
"O helpe, Orgoglio, helpe, or else we perish all."

21

At her so pitteous cry was much amooved
Her champion stout, and for to ayde his frend,
Againe his wonted angry weapon prooved:°
130 But all in vaine: for he has read his end
In that bright shield, and all their forces spend
Themselves in vaine: for since that glauncing° sight,
He hath no powre to hurt, nor to defend;
As where th' Almightyes lightning brond does light,
135 It dimmes the dazèd eyen, and daunts the senses quight.

22

Whom when the Prince, to battell new addrest,
And threatning high his dreadfull stroke did see,
His sparkling blade about his head he blest,°
And smote off quite his right leg by the knee,
140 That downe he tombled; as an aged tree,
High growing on the top of rocky clift,
Whose hartstrings with keene steele nigh hewen be,
The mightie trunck halfe rent, with ragged rift
Doth roll adowne the rocks, and fall with fearefull drift.°

23

Or as a Castle rearèd high and round,
By subtile engins and malicious slight°
Is underminèd from the lowest ground,
And her foundation forst,° and feebleed quight,
150 At last downe falles, and with her heapèd hight
Her hastie ruine does more heavie make,
And yields it selfe unto the victours might;
Such was this Gyaunts fall, that seemed to shake
The stedfast globe of earth, as it for feare did quake.

118. fruitfull-headed: many-headed.

129. prooved: tried.

132. glauncing: shining.

138. blest: waved.

144. drift: force.

146. slight: magical trickery.

148. forst: destroyed.

24

- The knight then lightly leaping to the pray,
 155 With mortall steele him smot againe so sore,
 That headlesse his unweldy bodie lay,
 All wallowd in his owne fowle bloudy gore,
 Which flowèd from his wounds in wondrous store.
 But soone as breath out of his breast did pas,
 160 That huge great body, which the Gyaunt bore,
 Was vanisht quite, and of that monstrous mas
 Was nothing left, but like an emptie bladder was.

25

- Whose grievous fall, when false Duessa spide,
 Her golden cup she cast unto the ground,
 165 And crownèd mitre^o rudely threw aside;
 Such percing grieve her stubborne hart did wound,
 That she could not endure that dolefull stound,^o
 But leaving all behind her, fled away:
 The light-foot Squire her quickly turnd around,
 170 And by hard meanes enforcing her to stay,
 So brought unto his Lord, as his deservèd pray.

26

- The royall Virgin, which beheld from farre,
 In pensive plight, and sad perplexitie,
 The whole atchievement^o of this doubtfull warre,
 175 Came running fast to greet his victorie,
 With sober gladnesse, and myld modestie,
 And with sweet joyous cheare him thus bespake;
 "Faire braunch of nobless, flowre of chevalrie,
 That with your worth the world amazèd make,
 180 How shall I quite^o the paines, ye suffer for my sake?

27

- "And you^o fresh bud of vertue springing fast,
 Whom these sad eyes saw nigh unto deaths dore,
 What hath poore Virgin for such perill past,
 Wherewith you to reward? Accept therefore
 185 My simple selfe, and service evermore;
 And he that high does sit, and all things see
 With equall^o eyes, their merits to restore,^o
 Behold what ye this day have done for mee,
 And what I cannot quite, requite with usuree.^o

28

- 190 "But sith^o the heavens, and your faire handling^o
 Have made you maister of the field this day,
 Your fortune maister eke with governing,^o
 And well begun end all so well, I pray,
 Ne let that wicked woman scape away;

165. mitre: a crown with three peaks.

167. stound: sadness.

174. atchievement: progress.

180. quite: repay.

181. you: that is, the Squire.

187. equall: impartial. restore: reward.

189. usuree: interest.

190. sith: since. handling: behavior.

192. Your fortune . . . governing: Confi
 your good fortune also by prudent condu



The Red Cross Knight by John Singleton Copley (ca. 1780). Oil.

195 For she it is, that did my Lord bethrall,^o
 My dearest Lord, and deepe in dongeon lay,
 Where he his better dayes hath wasted all.
 O heare, how piteous he to you for ayd does call."

29

200 Forthwith he gave in charge unto his Squire,
 That scarlot whore to keepen carefully;
 Whiles he himselfe with greedie great desire
 Into the Castle entred forcibly,
 Where living creature none he did espye;
 Then gan he lowdly through the house to call:
 205 But no man cared to answer to his crye.
 There rained a solemne silence over all,
 Nor voice was heard, nor wight was seene in bowre^o or
 hall.

195. bethrall: enslave.

207. bowre: private apartment.

37

Through every rowme he sought, and every bowr,
 But no where could he find that wofull thrall:
 210 At last he came unto an yron doore,
 That fast was lockt, but key found not at all
 Emongst that bounch,^o to open it withall;
 But in the same a little grate was pight,^o
 Through which he sent his voyce, and lowd did call
 215 With all his powre, to weet if living wight
 Were housèd therewithin, whom he enlargen^o might.

38

Therewith an hollow, dreary, murmuring voyce
 These piteous plaints and dolours did resound;
 "O who is that, which brings me happy choyce
 220 Of death, that here lye dying every stound,^o
 Yet live perforce in balefull darkenesse bound?
 For now three Moones have changèd thrice their hew,^o
 And have beene thrice hid underneath the ground,
 Since I the heavens chearefull face did vew,
 225 O welcome thou, that doest of death bring tydings trew."

39

Which when that Champion heard, with percing point
 Of pity deare^o his hart was thrillèd sore,
 And trembling horror ran through every joynt,
 For ruth^o of gentle knight so fowle forlore:^o
 230 Which shaking off, he rent that yron dore,
 With furious force, and indignation fell;
 Where entred in, his foot could find no flore,
 But all a deep descent, as darke as hell,
 That breathèd ever forth a filthie banefull^o smell.

40

But neither darkenesse fowle, nor filthy bands,
 Nor noyous^o smell his purpose could withhold,
 (Entire affection hateth nicer^o hands)
 But that with constant zeale, and courage bold,
 240 After long paines and labours manifold,
 He found the meanes that Prisoner up to reare;
 Whose feeble thighes, unhable to uphold
 His pinèd^o corse, him scarce to light could beare,
 A ruefull spectacle of death and ghastly dreere.^o

41

His sad dull eyes deepe sunck in hollow pits,
 245 Could not endure th' unwonted sunne to view;
 His bare thin cheekes for want of better bits,^o
 And empty sides deceived of^o their dew,^o

212. **bounch**: a bunch of keys that Arthur took from an old man in the castle.
 213. **pight**: placed.

216. **enlargen**: set free.

220. **stound**: moment.

222. **hew**: form.

227. **deare**: dire.

229. **ruth**: pity. **forlore**: lost.

234. **banefull**: poisonous.

236. **noyous**: noxious.

237. **nicer**: too fussy, difficult to please.

242. **pinèd**: wasted.

243. **drere**: dreariness.

246. **bits**: that is, of food.

247. **deceivèd of**: deprived of. **dew**: due.

Could make a stony hart his hap to rew;
 His rawbone armes, whose mighty brawnèd bowrs°
 Were wont to rive° steele plates, and helmets hew,
 Were cleane consumed, and all his vitall powres
 Decayd, and all his flesh shronk up like withered flowres.

42

Whom when his Lady saw, to him she ran
 With hasty joy: to see him made her glad,
 And sad to view his visage pale and wan,
 Who earst° in flowres of freshest youth was clad.
 Tho° when her well of teares she wasted had,
 She said, "Ah dearest Lord, what evill starre
 On you hath fround, and pourd his influence bad,
 That of your selfe ye thus berobbèd arre,
 And this misseeming hew° your manly looks doth marre?"

43

"But welcome now my Lord, in wele or woe,
 Whose presence I have lackt too long a day;
 And fie on Fortune mine avowèd foe,
 Whose wrathrull wreakes° them selves do now alay°.
 And for these wrongs shall treble penaunce pay
 Of treble good: good growes of evils priefe."°
 The chearelesse man, whom sorrow did dismay,
 Had no delight to treaten° of his grieve;
 His long endured famine needed more reliefe.

44

"Faire Lady," then said that victorious knight,
 "The things, that grievous were to do, or beare,
 Them to renew,° I wote,° breeds no delight;
 Best musicke breeds delight in loathing eare:
 But th' onely good, that growes of passèd feare,
 Is to be wise, and ware° of like agein.
 This dayes ensample hath this lesson deare
 Deepe written in my heart with yron pen,
 That blisse may not abide in state of mortall men.

45

"Henceforth, sir knight, take to you wonted strength,
 And maister these mishaps with patient might;
 Loe! where your foe lyes stretcht in monstrous length,
 and loe! that wicked woman in your sight,
 The roote of all your care, and wretched plight,°
 Now in your powre, to let her live, or dye."
 "To do her dye," quoth Una, "were despight,°
 And shame t'avenge so weake an enemy;
 But spoile° her of her scarlot robe, and let her fly."

249. bowrs: muscles.

250. rive: rip up.

256. earst: formerly.

257. Tho: then.

261. hew: appearance.

265. wreakes: revenges. alay: decrease.

267. priefe: experience.

269. treaten: talk.

273. renew: remember. wote: think.

276. ware: wary.

284. plight: condition.

286. despight: wrong.

288. spoile: deprive.

46

290 So as she bad, that witch they disaraid,
And robd of royall robes, and purple pall,^o
And ornaments that richly were displaid;
Ne sparèd they to strip her naked all.
Then when they had despoild her tire and call,^o
Such as she was, their eyes might her behold,
295 That her misshapèd parts did them appall:
A loathly, wrinckled hag, ill favoured, old,
Whose secret filth good manners biddeth not be told.

290. **pall:** mantle.

293. **tire and call:** attire and headgear.

47

Her craftie head was altogether bald,
And as in hate of honorable eld,^o
300 Was overgrowne with scurfe and filthy scald;^o
Her teeth out of her rotten gummès were feld,^o
And her sowre breath abhominably smeld;
Her drièd dugs,^o like bladders lacking wind,
Hong downe, and filthy matter from them weld;^o
305 Her wrizled^o skin as rough, as maple rind,^o
So scabby was, that would have loathd all womankind.

299. **eld:** old age.

300. **scald:** scabs.

301. **feld:** fallen.

303. **dugs:** breasts.

304. **weld:** ran.

305. **wrizled:** wrinkled. **rind:** bark.

49

Which when the knights beheld, amazd they were,
And wondred at so fowle deformèd wight.
"Such then," said Una, "as she seemeth here,
310 Such is the face of falshood, such the sight
Of fowle Duessa, when her borrowed light
Is laid away, and counterfesaunce^o knowne."
Thus when they had the witch disrobèd quight,
And her filthy feature^o open showne,
315 They let her goe at will, and wander wayes unknowne.

312. **counterfesaunce:** hypocrisy.

314. **feature:** appearance.

50

She, flying fast from heavens hated face,
And from the world that her discovered wide,^o
Fled to the wastfull^o wildernessè apace,
From living eyes her open shame to hide,
320 And lurkt in rocks and caves long unespide.
But that faire crew of knights, and Una faire,
Did in that castle afterwards abide,
To rest them selves, and weary powres repaire,
Where store they found of all that dainty was and rare.

317. **wide:** completely.

318. **wastfull:** desolate.

Sir Th (1405)

venturer, member of Parliament and a soldier and he died of Parliam prison, most en side in the shire son that he after about King Ar- probal work, published Wars 'The Death of Ar- wrot inter, William Cax- thure up of translations in mental stories. But the beauty and artistic to the most popular prose

Darthur, coming as it fifteenth century, serves and a nostalgic summary of, th its castles, knights, feudal traditions. The characters in is from an older medieval fairy s longer real to Malory's audi- developing into a new class of ing the old feudal system to die Arthur depicted by Malory almost r existed, although a certain Ar- the old Britons in their struggle Anglo-Saxon invaders during the ry. Using the Continental and Celtic

legends, Malory mythically enlarged this Arthur until he became the very embodiment of British values and even a supposed ancestor of the English kings.

In Malory's mythic form, Arthur has the mysterious birth typical of the romance hero. His childhood initiation—the pulling of a magic sword from a rock—points to his kinship with such mythic and romance heroes as the Greek Theseus and the German Siegfried. His strange death, departure, and promised return also place him among other “once and future kings”—heroes who become emblematic representations of national or cultural visions.

If King Arthur, Merlin, Lancelot, Galahad, and Guinevere were, for the post-Chaucerian English, no longer historical figures, they were still powerful expressions of the chivalric ideals of the English past. Their spirit of adventure and their sense of a heroic destiny would be very much a part of the tumultuous Elizabethan age that was on the horizon.

These figures from England's feudal past will reappear in the nineteenth century, in Alfred Tennyson's group of narrative poems called *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson brought Arthur and his knights back at a time when the English nation needed a reminder of its heroic past and of its destiny. The Arthurian legend reappeared yet again in the twentieth century in a book called *The Once and Future King* (1958), by British writer T. H. White. Controversial as White's treatment is, the power of the Arthurian stories is evidenced by the fact that his book was a best seller and that in its musical form, called *Camelot*, it became a long-running Broadway hit.

In the early parts of Malory's story, Arthur persuades the knights in his kingdom to unite in the fellowship of the Round Table, dedicated to knighthood's code of chivalry and honor. For a while, Arthur's plan works, and justice prevails in his kingdom. But human frailties, including Arthur's own, gradually undermine the plan. The fellowship of the Round Table becomes corrupt and no longer holds the kingdom together. In this diseased state, the domain of Arthur is vulnerable to the evil forces personified in Sir Mordred, the king's own illegitimate son. Ultimately Arthur dies, but even in his death, we are reminded that his role is eternal.

What follows here is Malory's account of King Arthur's death, which comes at the end of *Le Morte Darthur*, and which gives the book its title.

So upon Trinity Sunday at night King Arthur dreamed a wonderful dream, and in his dream he seemed that he saw upon a chafflet¹ a chair, and the chair was fast to a wheel, and thereupon sat King Arthur in the richest cloth of gold that might be made. And the King thought there was under him, far from him, an hideous deep black water, and therein was all manner of serpents, and worms, and wild beasts, foul and horrible. And suddenly the King thought that the wheel turned upside down, and he fell among the serpents, and every beast took him by a limb. And then the King cried as he lay in his bed, "Help, help!"

And then knights, squires, and yeomen awaked the King, and then he was so amazed that he wist² not where he was. And then so he awaked until it was nigh day, and then he fell on slumbering again, not sleeping nor thoroughly waking. So the King seemed verily that there came Sir Gawain unto him with a number of fair ladies with him. So when King Arthur saw him, he said, "Welcome, my sister's son. I weened ye had been dead. And now

I see thee on-live, much am I beholden unto Almighty Jesu. Ah, fair nephew and my sister's son, what been these ladies that hither be come with you?"

"Sir," said Sir Gawain, "all these be ladies for whom I have foughten for when I was man living. And all these are tho³ that I did battle for in righteous quarrels, and God hath given them that grace, at their great prayer, because I did battle for them for their right, that they should bring me hither unto you. Thus much hath given me leave God, for to warn you of your death. For and ye fight as tomorn⁴ with Sir Mordred, as ye both have assigned,⁵ doubt ye not ye must be slain, and the most party of your people on both parties. And for the great grace and goodness that Almighty Jesu hath unto you, and for pity of you and many mo⁶ other good men there shall be slain, God hath sent me to you of his special grace to give you warning that in no wise ye do battle as tomorn, but that ye take a treatise⁷ for a month-day. And proffer you largely,⁸ so that tomorn ye put in a delay. For within a month shall come Sir Lancelot with all his noble knights and rescue you worshipfully and slay Sir Mordred and all that ever will hold with him."

Then Sir Gawain and all the ladies vanished. And anon the King called upon his knights, squires, and yeomen, and charged them wightly⁹ to fetch his noble lords and wise bishops unto him. And when they were come the King told them of his avision,¹⁰ that Sir Gawain had told him and warned him that, and he fought on the morn, he should be slain. Then the King commanded Sir Lucan the Butler and his brother Sir Bedivere the Bold, with two bishops with them, and charged them in any wise to take a treatise for a month-day with Sir Mordred. "And spare not: Proffer him lands and goods as much as ye think reasonable."

So then they departed and came to Sir Mordred where he had a grim host of an hundred thousand, and there they entreated¹¹ Sir Mordred long time. And at the last Sir Mordred was agreed for to

1. chafflet: scaffold.

2. wist: knew.

3. tho: those.

4. For . . . tomorn: If you fight tomorrow.

5. assigned: decided.

6. mo: more.

7. treatise: treaty, truce.

8. proffer you largely: make generous offers.

9. wightly: quickly.

10. avision: dream.

11. entreated: dealt with.

have Cornwall and Kent by King Arthur's days, and after that, all England, after the days of King Arthur.

Then were they condescended¹² that King Arthur and Sir Mordred should meet betwixt both their hosts, and everich¹³ of them should bring fourteen persons. And so they came with this word unto Arthur. Then said he, "I am glad that this is done," and so he went into the field.

And when King Arthur should depart, he warned all his host that, and they see any sword drawn, "Look ye come on fiercely and slay that traitor Sir Mordred, for I in no wise trust him." In like wise Sir Mordred warned his host that "And ye see any manner of sword drawn, look that ye come on fiercely, and so slay all that ever before you standeth, for in no wise I will not trust for this treatise." And in the same wise said Sir Mordred unto his host, "For I know well my father will be avenged upon me."

And so they met as their pointment¹⁴ was and were agreed and accorded thoroughly. And wine was fetched and they drank together. Right so came an adder out of a little heath bush, and it stung a knight in the foot. And so when the knight felt him so stung, he looked down and saw the adder. And anon he drew his sword to slay the adder, and thought none other harm. And when the host on both parties saw that sword drawn, then they blew beams,¹⁵ trumpets, and horns, and shouted grimly. And so both hosts dressed them¹⁶ together. And King Arthur took his horse and said, "Alas, this unhappy day!" and so rode to his party, and Sir Mordred in like wise.

And never since was there never seen a more dolefuller battle in no Christian land, for there was but rushing and riding, foining¹⁷ and striking; and many a grim word was there spoken of either to other, and many a deadly stroke. But ever King Arthur rode throughout the battle¹⁸ of Sir Mordred many times and did full nobly, as a noble king should do, and at all times he fainted never. And Sir Mordred did his devoir¹⁹ that day and put himself in great peril.

12. condescended: agreed.

13. everich: each.

14. pointment: arrangement.

15. beams: trumpets.

16. dressed them: prepared to come.

17. foining: lunging.

18. battle: battalion.

19. devoir: knightly duty.

And thus they fought all the long day, and never stinted till the noble knights were laid to the cold earth. And ever they fought still till it was near night, and by then was there an hundred thousand laid dead upon the down. Then was King Arthur wood-wroth²⁰ out of measure when he saw his people so slain from him. And so he looked about him and could see no mo of all his host, and good knights left no mo on-live, but two knights; the t'one was Sir Lucan the Butler and [the other] his brother Sir Bedivere. And yet they were full sore wounded.

"Jesu, mercy," said the King, "where are all my noble knights become? Alas that ever I should see this doleful day! For now," said King Arthur, "I am come to mine end. But would to God," said he, "that I wist now where were that traitor Sir Mordred that has caused all this mischief."

Then King Arthur looked about and was ware where stood Sir Mordred leaning upon his sword among a great heap of dead men.

"Now give me my spear," said King Arthur unto Sir Lucan, "for yonder I have espied the traitor that all this woe hath wrought."

"Sir, let him be," said Sir Lucan, "for he is unhappy.²¹ And if ye pass this unhappy day ye shall be right well revenged upon him. And, good lord, remember ye of your night's dream, and what the spirit of Sir Gawain told you tonight, and yet God of his great goodness hath preserved you hitherto. And for God's sake, my lord, leave off by this, for, blessed be God, ye have won the field: for yet we been here three on-live, and with Sir Mordred is not one on-live. And therefore if ye leave off now, this wicked day of destiny is past."

"Now, tide²² me death, tide me life," said the King, "now I see him yonder alone, he shall never escape mine hands. For at a better avail²³ shall I never have him."

"God speed you well!" said Sir Bedivere.

Then the King got his spear in both his hands and ran toward Sir Mordred, crying and saying, "Traitor, now is thy deathday come!"

And when Sir Mordred saw King Arthur he ran

20. wood-wroth: mad with rage.

21. unhappy: unlucky for you.

22. tide: betide.

23. avail: advantage.



Arthur's last battle, the Battle of Camlann (14th century).

until him with his sword drawn in his hand, and there King Arthur smote Sir Mordred under the shield, with a foin of his spear, throughout the body more than a fathom.²⁴ And when Sir Mordred felt that he had his death's wound, he thrust himself with the might that he had up to the burr²⁵ of King Arthur's spear and right so he smote his father King Arthur with his sword holden in both his hands, upon the side of his head, that the sword pierced the helmet and the tay²⁶ of the

24. fathom: six feet.

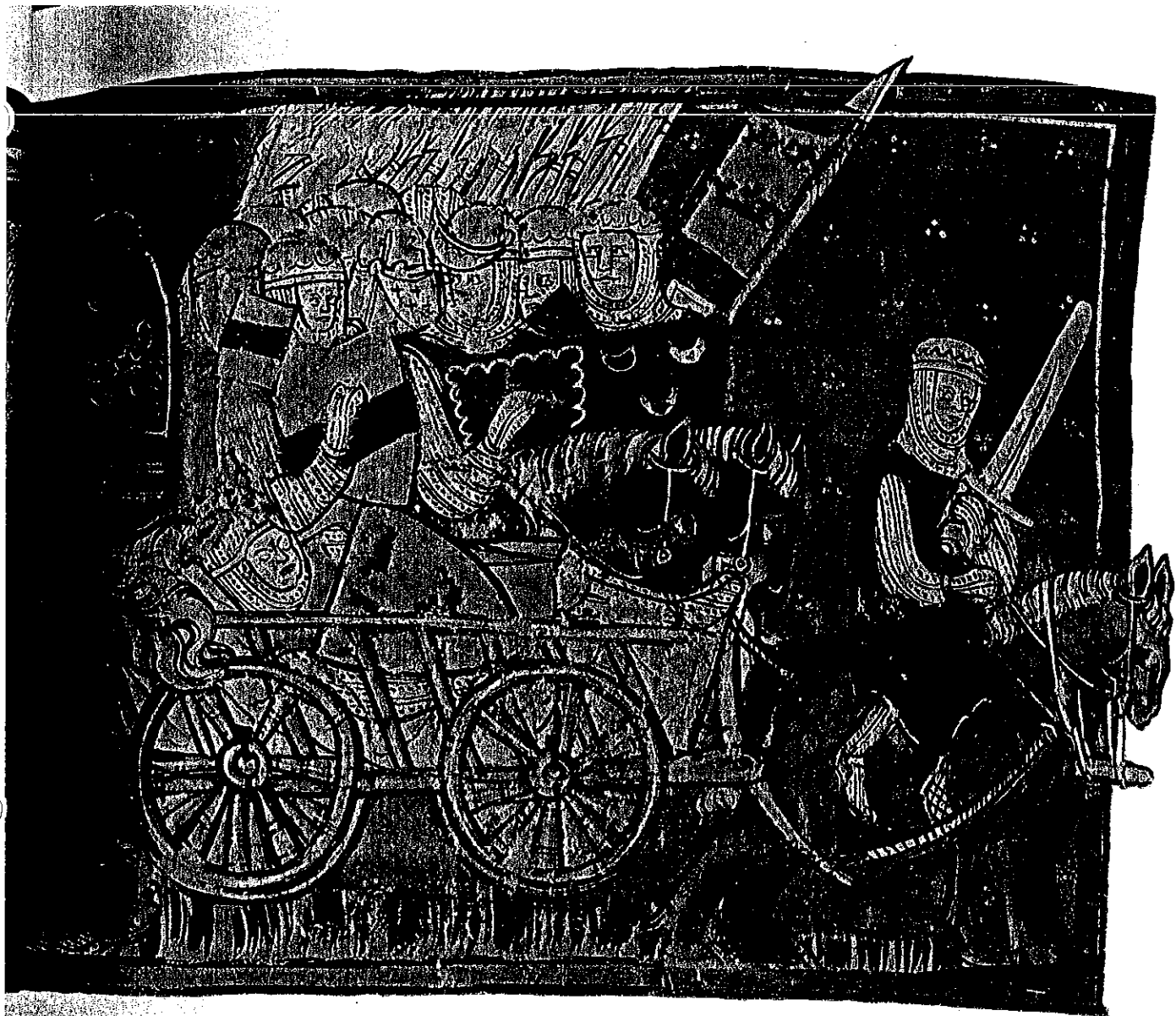
25. burr: hand guard.

26. tay: edge.

brain. And therewith Sir Mordred dashed down stark dead to the earth.

And noble King Arthur fell in a swough²⁷ to the earth, and there he swooned oftentimes, and Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere oftentimes heaved him up. And so, weakly betwixt them, they led him to a little chapel not far from the seaside, and when the King was there, him thought him reasonably eased. Then heard they people cry in the field, "Now go thou, Sir Lucan," said the King, "and

27. swough: swoon.



Royal Library, The Hague.

do me to wit²⁸ what betokens that noise in the field."

So Sir Lucan departed, for he was grievously wounded in many places. And so as he yede²⁹ he saw and harkened by the moonlight how that pillers³⁰ and robbers were come into the field to pill and to rob many a full noble knight of brooches and bees³¹ and of many a good ring and many a rich jewel. And who that were not dead all out

there they slew them for their harness and their riches. When Sir Lucan understood this work, he came to the King as soon as he might and told him all what he had heard and seen. "Therefore by my read,"³² said Sir Lucan, "it is best that we bring you to some town."

"I would it were so," said the King, "but I may not stand, my head works³³ so. Ah, Sir Lancelot," said King Arthur, "this day have I sore missed

28. do me to wit: let me know.

29. yede: walked.

30. pillers: plunderers.

31. bees: bracelets.

32. read: advice.

33. works: aches.

thee. And alas that ever I was against thee, for now have I my death, whereof Sir Gawain me warned in my dream."

Then Sir Lucan took up the King the t'one party³⁴ and Sir Bedivere the other party; and in the lifting up the King swooned and in the lifting Sir Lucan fell in a swoon that part of his guts fell out of his body, and therewith the noble knight's heart burst. And when the King awoke he beheld Sir Lucan how he lay foaming at the mouth and part of his guts lay at his feet.

"Alas," said the King, "this is to me a full heavy sight to see this noble duke so die for my sake, for he would have holpen me that had more need of help than I. Alas that he would not complain him for his heart was so set to help me. Now Jesu have mercy upon his soul."

Then Sir Bedivere wept for the death of his brother.

"Now leave this mourning and weeping, gentle knight," said the King, "for all this will not avail me. For wit thou well, and³⁵ I might live myself, the death of Sir Lucan would grieve me evermore. But my time passeth on fast," said the King. "Therefore," said King Arthur unto Sir Bedivere, "take thou here Excalibur³⁶ my good sword and go with it to yonder water's side; and when thou comest there I charge thee throw my sword in that water and come again and tell me what thou sawest there."

"My lord," said Sir Bedivere, "your commandment shall be done, and [I shall] lightly³⁷ bring you word again."

So Sir Bedivere departed. And by the way he beheld that noble sword, that the pommel and the haft was all precious stones. And then he said to himself, "If I throw this rich sword in the water, thereof shall never come good, but harm and loss." And then Sir Bedivere hid Excalibur under a tree. And so, as soon as he might, he came again unto the King and said he had been at the water and had thrown the sword into the water.

"What saw thou there?" said the King.

"Sir," he said, "I saw nothing but waves and winds."

"That is untruly said of thee," said the King.

"And therefore go thou lightly again and do my commandment; as thou art to me lief³⁸ and dear, spare not, but throw it in."

Then Sir Bedivere returned again and took the sword in his hand. And yet him thought sin and shame to throw away that noble sword. And so eft³⁹ he hid the sword and returned again and told the King that he had been at the water and done his commandment.

"What sawest thou there?" said the King.

"Sir," he said, "I saw nothing but waters and wap and waves wan."

"Ah, traitor unto me and untrue," said King Arthur, "now hast thou betrayed me twice. Who would have weened that thou that hast been to me so lief and dear, and thou art named a noble knight, and would betray me for the riches of this sword. But now go again lightly, for thy long tarrying putteth me in great jeopardy of my life, for I have taken cold. And but if thou do now as I bid thee, if ever I may see thee I shall slay thee mine own hands, for thou wouldest for my rich sword see me dead."

Then Sir Bedivere departed and went to the sword and lightly took it up, and so he went to the water's side; and there he bound the girdle about the hilts, and threw the sword as far into the water as he might. And there came an arm and a hand above the water and took it and clutched it, and shook it thrice and brandished; and then vanished away the hand with the sword into the water. So Sir Bedivere came again to the King and told him what he saw.

"Alas," said the King, "help me hence, for I dread me I have tarried overlong."

Then Sir Bedivere took the King upon his back and so went with him to that water's side. And when they were at the water's side, even fast by the bank hove⁴⁰ a little barge with many fair ladies in it; and among them all was a queen; and all they had black hoods, and all they wept and shrieked when they saw King Arthur.

"Now put me into that barge," said the King; and so he did softly. And there received him three ladies with great mourning, and so they set them down. And in one of their laps King Arthur laid his head, and then the queen said, "Ah, my dear

34. t'one party: on one side.

35. and: if.

36. Excalibur: Arthur's sword, given him by the mysterious Lady of the Lake.

37. lightly: quickly.

38. lief: beloved.

39. eft: again.

40. hove: waited.

brother, why have ye tarried so long from me? Alas, this wound on your head hath caught overmuch cold." And anon they rowed fromward the land, and Sir Bedivere beheld all tho ladies go froward him.

Then Sir Bedivere cried and said, "Ah, my lord Arthur, what shall become of me, now ye go from me and leave me here alone among mine enemies?"

"Comfort thyself," said the King, "and do as well as thou mayest, for in me is no trust for to trust in. For I must into the vale of Avilion⁴¹ to heal me of my grievous wound. And if thou hear nevermore of me, pray for my soul."

But ever the queen and ladies wept and shrieked that it was pity to hear. And as soon as Sir Bedivere had lost the sight of the barge he wept and wailed and so took⁴² the forest, and went all that night. And in the morning he was ware betwixt two holts hoar⁴³ of a chapel and an hermitage. . . .

Thus of Arthur I find no more written in books that been authorized, neither more of the very

certainty of his death heard I never read, but thus was he led away in a ship wherein were three queens: that one was King Arthur's sister, Queen Morgan la Fée, the t'other was the Queen of North Wales, and the third was the Queen of the Waste Lands. . . .

Now more of the death of King Arthur could I never find but that these ladies brought him to his burials, and such one was buried there that the hermit bore witness that sometime was Bishop of Canterbury. But yet the hermit knew not in certain that he was verily the body of King Arthur, for this tale Sir Bedivere, a Knight of the Table Round, made it to be written. Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place. And men say that he shall come again and he shall win the Holy Cross. Yet I will not say that it shall be so, but rather I will say, Here in this world he changed his life. And many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: *Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus*.⁴⁴

41. Avilion: a legendary island, sometimes identified with the earthly Paradise.

42. took: took to.

43. holts hoar: old thickets.

44. *Hic . . . futurus*: "Here lies Arthur, the once and future king."

Responding to the Story

Analyzing the Story

Identifying Facts

1. What does King Arthur learn in his dream on Trinity Sunday? What is Sir Lucan's advice to Arthur?
2. Explain what causes the battle to start.
3. As he is about to die, what does Arthur request of Sir Bedivere? How does Bedivere comply with this request?
4. What mysterious possibility is contained in the final paragraph?

Interpreting Meanings

5. In a word or phrase, sum up the atmosphere, or mood, of this story. How does Malory use details of setting to achieve that mood?
6. What Christian symbolism or allusions do you find in this excerpt? Consider the way the battle starts, Sir

Bedivere's responses to Arthur's dying request, and any other details. What might these Christian overtones signify about Arthur's role in British mythology?

7. In what ways do you think *Le Morte Darthur* reflects the dreams and values of the time during which it was written?
8. Near the end of the romance, Malory says of Arthur, "Here in this world he changed his life." Is such an accomplishment important in literature (and life) today?
9. What aspects of this story might appeal especially to people living in the last years of the twentieth century? Or do you think the story has little appeal to people today? Why?
10. List all the supernatural elements in this story. Do you recognize any of these elements as similar to those used in other romances (including contemporary movies, television stories, and science-fiction novels)?

Many people feel that this is one of the most powerful and moving of all the ballads. (Some modern versions have made the story humorous, perhaps because today we associate talking birds and supernatural transformations with children's television programs.) The refrain of the song uses

words common in balladry; they are even used years later in Shakespeare's songs. Each pair of lines was meant to be repeated and sung with the refrain, as is done in the first verse. Do you agree that love and death are themes of this ballad? Do you detect any other themes?

The Three Ravens

There were three ravens sat on a tree,
Down a down, hay down, hay down,
 There were three ravens sat on a tree,
With a down,
 5 There were three ravens sat on a tree,
 They were as black as they might be,
With a down, derry, derry, derry, down,
down.

The one of them said to his mate,
 "Where shall we our breakfast take?"
 10 "Down in yonder green field
 There lies a knight slain under his shield.
 "His hounds they lie down at his feet,
 So well they can their master keep.
 "His hawks they fly so eagerly,
 15 There's no fowl dare him come nigh."

Down there comes a fallow¹⁶ doe,
 As great with young as she might go.

She lifted up his bloody head,
 And kissed his wounds that were so red.

20 She got him up upon her back,
 And carried him to earthen lake.²¹

She buried him before the prime;²²
 She was dead herself ere evensong time.

God send every gentleman
 25 Such hawks, such hounds, and such a
 lemman.²⁵

16. fallow: reddish-brown.

21. earthen lake: a pit.

22. prime: morning hour for monastic prayer.

25. lemman: mistress.

Responding to the Ballad

Analyzing the Ballad

Identifying Details

1. What do the ravens discuss in the poem?
2. According to the ballad, why is the fate of the dead knight enviable?

Interpreting Meanings

3. What elements of the supernatural are found in this ballad? Are such elements common in popular music today? What do you think the presence, or absence,

of the supernatural indicates about the culture in which a song flourishes?

4. Who might the red deer be? What might be the significance of the fact that she is "great with young"?
5. Describe what you feel is the **mood** of this ballad. How would you say this mood is created?
6. What seems to be the **tone** of the ballad—the singer's attitude toward love and death? Is it an attitude common in popular music today?
7. The song's **refrain** is a series of nonsensical words. In music today, do you ever hear this type of nonsense "patter"?